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The juniors were faced with the prospect of spending Xmas in this underground prison.

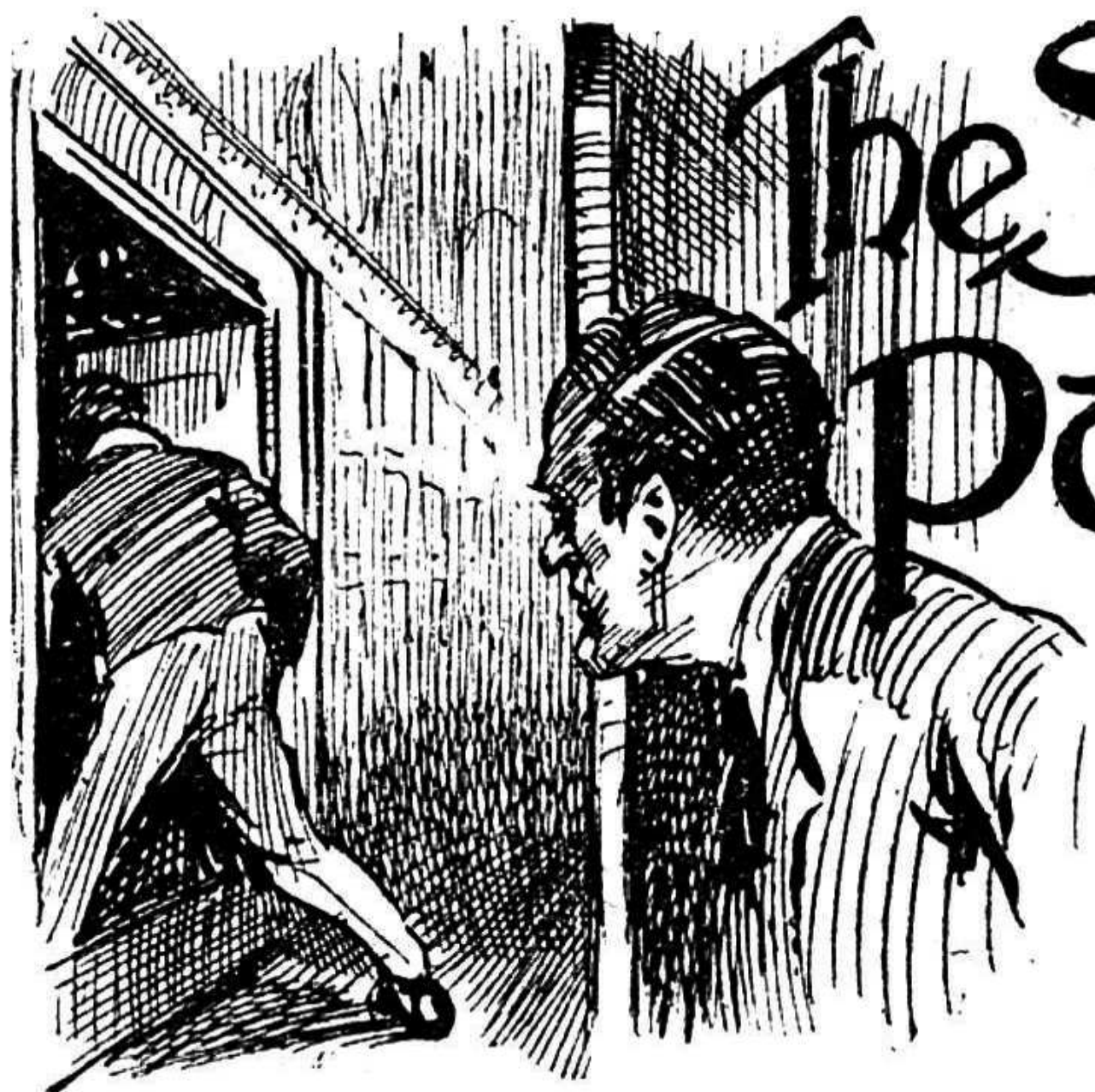


THE SECRET OF THE PANEL

A Grand Long Xmas Story of the Boys of St. Frank's and their amazing adventures at Glenthorne Manor.



"Better go easy here," murmured Pitt. "And don't talk much. There's no telling what we shall find at the bottom."



The Secret of the Panel!

or, The Yuletide
Adventurers.

Another Grand Long Christmas
Story of the Boys of St. Frank's
and their investigations of the
strange ghost mystery at Glen-
thorne Manor, where they are
the guests of Colonel Glenthorne

By *EDWY SEARLES BROOKS*

CHAPTER I.

HANDFORTH IS MYSTERIOUS.

S WISH—thud!

The snowball, dispatched with unerring aim, burst with beautiful precision over the ample features of Ferris, the staid and portly butler of Glenthorne Manor. The unfortunate Ferris staggered back drunkenly.

"Oh, sorry!" grinned Willy Handforth. "My mistake!"

Ferris was unable to make any adequate reply at the moment. He had just opened the great hall door, only to be greeted by that devastating charge of snow. His head and shoulders were smothered.

Willy, on the terrace, chuckled with delight. It was rather cheering to see the pompous butler in such a condition. Willy felt that he had not risen early for nothing.

He was merely one of the numerous guests at Glenthorne Manor for the Christmas holidays. Archie's pater had got up a special house-party of young people, and over a dozen St. Frank's juniors were included. Irene and Co., of the Moor View School, were also in evidence.

It was Christmas Eve—a crisp, sunny morning, with a keen frost in the air. The ground was smothered in six or seven inches of snow, the result of a phenomenally heavy fall during the last two or three days. It was not only Christmas time, but the weather was delightfully seasonable.

Ferris emerged from the barricade of snow, and agitatedly wiped himself down with a large handkerchief which he had just procured from some mysterious recess in his coat-tails.

"You—you reckless young rascal!" he exclaimed, restraining his temper with difficulty. "I am amazed, Master Handforth! I can do nothing but report this unseemly conduct to the master."

"Oh, come off it, Ferris, old horse!" said Willy indignantly. "What's all the fuss about? You're not afraid of a snowball, I suppose? Besides, it wasn't meant for you at all."

"I have nothing to say to you, Master Handforth," said the butler, with dignity.

"Good! That's one consolation, anyhow," said the hero of the Third. "The fact is, I was taking a pot-shot at the doorknocker, and I hit your face instead. Same thing! The mistake was natural!"

"I am amazed at your impudence, Master Handforth!" said the butler stiffly. "I cannot think that Colonel Glenthorne will countenance this outrageous behaviour on your part."

"Rats!" said Willy. "How the dickens was I to know you'd open the door at that minute? I tell you, I aimed at the knocker! I was putting in a bit of practice, and then you go and open the door without giving me warning. You ought to be more careful!"

Ferris turned without another word, and entered the house. He came face to face

with Archie Glenthorne, and the latter started, and adjusted his famous eye-glass.

"Good gad, Ferris, what's this?" asked Archie. "I mean to say, at your time of life, dash it! Playing snowballs, what? You're absolutely smothered, laddie! The good old necktie is a ruin!"

Ferris tried to compose himself.

"I think you had better ask Master Handforth for an explanation, sir," he replied curtly. "The young gentleman is out on the terrace, and I may add that I have never been treated so disrespectfully in all my life before!"

He passed on down the hall, and Archie stood staring.

"Well, dash it all!" murmured the swell of the Fourth. "The good old porpoise nearly ticked me off, by gad! I mean, he absolutely gazed at the young master with a few well-chosen glares! Somewhat near the edge, from a dashed butler! I mean to say, dash him!"

"What's the trouble, Archie?" asked Reggie Pitt, alighting in the hall with a thud, after descending the balustrade. "Something troubling the mighty brain? You look worried."

"Absolutely," said Archie. "I have always regarded Ferris as a dashed old stick, but this morning I can only characterise him as a bally blighter! To be exact, he positively presented me with the cold optic!"

Pitt grinned.

"You shouldn't take any notice of servants, old son—upper or lower!" he said genially. "I'm afraid Ferris has been spoilt. He likes the simple life—and just at present he isn't getting it. Cheer up, Archie! It's Christmas Eve, and the weather's glorious, and this morning we're going to have some skating. What could you wish for more?"

Archie sighed.

"Skating, what?" he murmured. "Odds-life! You energetic bounders will absolutely drag me out and push me on the good old ice! I know it! I can feel it rambling up and down the old tissues! Between you and me, old grapenut, the prospect is somewhat mottled!"

And Archie gave another sigh, and wended his way wearily to the cosy chimney seat—a special feature of the imposing lounge hall. An enormous log fire crackled and blazed comfortingly.

Jack Grey came downstairs a moment later, and he and Pitt sallied outside for a breath of fresh air before breakfast. Handforth and Co. had preceded them—but they had emerged by one of the side doors.

And Edward Oswald Handforth was unusually quiet.

He marched along, with hands clasped behind him, and with his head sunk on his chest. Church and McClure accompanied him in silence. They were rather glad of the unwonted peace.

"Hallo! What's this?" asked Willy, turning the corner. "Felix out for his morning

walk? Or are you thinking out a new Trackett Grim plot?"

Handforth came to a halt, and glared at his minor.

"Go away!" he said tartly. "Clear off!"

"He thinks he's a king, or a prince, or something!" said Willy, looking at Church and McClure. "Does he always give orders like this? How about dropping a snowball down his neck to cool him?"

Edward Oswald took a deep breath.

"I haven't got time to give you a tanning now, my lad—but you'll have it after breakfast!" he said grimly.

"Thanks awfully!" grinned Willy. "I shan't be able to consume my impatience! But what's caused this miracle? How is it that you can restrain yourself from biffing me on the spot?"

"You young rotter! I'm busy!" snorted Handforth. "I'm thinking of the big investigation! After breakfast we're going to explore the old tunnel, and get to the bottom of that intangible mystery!"

Willy pricked up his ears. This was the first he had heard of any tunnel and any impending investigation. Apparently the matter was a secret. But with his major to deal with, Willy was optimistic.

CHAPTER II.

A DEAD SECRET.



WILLY changed his tactics at once. Like a wise general, he realised that this was an occasion for diplomacy.

"Oh, sorry!" he said carelessly. "I didn't know it was anything important, Ted! I wouldn't dream of bothering you if you're busy with planning out a detective investigation."

Handforth waved his hand regally.

"That's all right—you can buzz off," he said, in a condescending voice. "I'm glad to see that you appreciate the importance of the occasion."

"Appreciate it!" echoed Willy. "My dear chap, I'm overwhelmed! I know what you are once you get started! That brain of yours works so jolly fast that any normally clever chap is left floundering! Somehow, I think you must have got two brains instead of one!"

Handforth beamed.

"Well, I wouldn't say that!" he said modestly. "But everybody knows what my brain is!"

"You bet they do!" agreed Willy. "Your brain is about as big as a couple of pin-points—Ahem! I—I mean, size isn't everything, is it? Quality counts, you know. A born idiot usually has a whacking great brain!"

Handforth looked suspicious.

"Didn't you say my brain's as big as two?" he demanded. "Look here, my son,

you'd better clear off before you get hurt! And don't ask me to tell you about this secret! It's absolutely private."

"Rather!" agreed Willy. "My hat! Fancy dreaming for a moment that I should ask any questions! I wouldn't pry into your silly old secret for anything!"

Handforth started.

"Secret! Who told you there was a secret?" he demanded.

"Oh, I—I just guessed it, you know," said Willy promptly. "But don't bother to tell me anything about it—I'm not curious! As a matter of fact, I was just feeling a bit awed. You make a chap feel that way, Ted. I suppose it must be your presence. You know, you seem to spread a kind of majestic atmosphere round you!"

"When I'm thinking out a problem, I don't like to be bothered!" retorted Handforth. "And that business at the lodge is jolly mysterious! Last night we proved there isn't a ghost, but there's something fishy going on!"

"Oh, rather!" agreed Willy. "I thought that all along!"

He hadn't the faintest idea what his major was talking about, but it was just as well to encourage him.

"All those mysterious sounds in Lucy's bed-room weren't caused by a ghost!" said Handforth firmly. "I believe there's some dirty work afoot! There's a coiners' den underground—in that old tunnel! That's my theory, anyhow. And we're going to—What the dickens are you squinting at me for, Walter Church?"

Church turned red.

"I wasn't squinting!" he ejaculated.

"You made a horrible face!" said Handforth, staring. "Of course, it's horrible enough at the best of times, but——"

"It's all right—he was only winking!" put in Willy calmly. "McClure gave you a kick just now, but you didn't notice it! They've been giving you the tip not to tell me the secret."

Handforth turned to his chums, and regarded them witheringly.

"You fatheads!" he snorted. "Do you think I'd tell anything to this cheeky young bounder?"

"You fathead! You've told him!" said Church fiercely.

"Every giddy word!" snapped McClure. "What's the good of trusting a secret to you? This fag comes along and questions you, and you let the whole cat out of the bag!"

Handforth started.

"You're mad!" he declared. "I haven't told him a thing!"

"Not at all!" grinned Willy. "I only know that you heard a lot of rummy sounds in Lucy's bed-room last night at the lodge! I only know that there's a hidden tunnel somewhere, and that you mean to explore it."

"By George!" breathed Handforth, looking startled. "Somebody's been gassing! How the dickens did Willy find out all this?"

One of you idiots must have told him everything!"

"You told him yourself!" yelled Church indignantly.

"I did!" roared Handforth. "Why, you fathead! I haven't opened my mouth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure suddenly lost their indignation, and roared. Extraordinarily enough, Handforth really and truly believed that he had kept the secret! He didn't even realise that he had unwittingly given the game away. And his chums saw the humour of the situation.

"All right; it doesn't matter!" chuckled Willy. "Don't worry, Ted; I'll keep the secret. But if you want to stop it going any further you'd better wear a gag!"

"Why, you—you young——"

"And now that I know all about it, I might as well take part in this exploration stunt," went on Willy. "Oh, I don't know, though," he added. "What do I care about your mouldy affairs? The whole thing'll come to nothing, anyway. I'm going skating with my pals!"

Willy turned and strolled off.

"I say, wait a minute!" said Church, running after him. "You won't gas about this affair, will you? There's only a small crowd of us in the know, and we don't want the whole house talking. Keep it dark!"

Willy nodded.

"You can trust me," he said promptly. "As far as that secret's concerned, you can look upon me as a dead oyster!"

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERY AT THE LODGE.



WILLY HANDFORTH wasn't at all keen on the secret now he knew it. And

he resolved to let the matter drop. He had his own friends at Glenthorne Manor with him—Chubby Heath and Owen minor of the Third. And they had plenty of things to do on their own.

The mysterious affair at the lodge was exercising the minds of several Fourth-Formers, however. Reginald Pitt himself was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery.

Only the previous night Pitt and Handforth and several others had kept a vigil in the lodge. The little old-fashioned building was solely occupied by Minns, the lodge-keeper.

Lucy Minns, his daughter, was home for Christmas—she always regarded Glenthorne Manor as her home, for she had been born in the lodge, and all her childhood had been spent there. Her father was one of Colonel Glenthorne's oldest retainers.

But Lucy had been looking rather pale and shaken since her arrival. She was helping at the Manor, for there was a lot of extra work to be done in consequence of the many guests. And she had been sleeping in the lodge itself, until the previous night.

The night before that she had fled from the lodge, screaming, to fall swooning in the snow. Fortunately a number of juniors had been out singing alleged carols, and they had quickly carried the girl indoors.

She had told an extraordinary story of hearing ghostly sounds in her bed-room—dull, mysterious rappings, creaks, and other uncanny phenomena. Pitt & Co. had been so impressed that they had made up their minds to investigate the matter for themselves.

And the midnight vigil was the result.

No ghost had been discovered, but plenty of eerie sounds had made themselves heard in Lucy's bed-room. Pitt was particularly keen, expressing the opinion that there might be some peculiar business afoot far underground. Reggie had been seeking a natural explanation of the remarkable manifestations.

And to everybody's surprise, Archie had calmly declared that a secret tunnel actually existed—an old underground passage leading from the Manor to the lodge, and even beyond. It was very ancient, having been built in Cromwellian days.

This morning, therefore, the juniors were particularly keen.

Archie had promised to show them the entrance to the tunnel, and an exploration was to follow. But not a word was said to anybody outside the chosen circle. Even the other Fourth Formers present were left in ignorance.

And Willy would have known nothing but for his major's rashness.

"Just like your fatheaded carelessness!" said McClure, as he and his chums made their way indoors. "You've told Willy all about it now, and goodness knows what'll happen. Everybody in the house will be talking, and the colonel will get to know. Then he'll forbid us to go down into that tunnel at all!"

"But—but I didn't tell him anything!" said Handforth indignantly. "The young beggar wormed the giddy information out of me!" he added, contradicting his own statement. "I've never known such a wily rotter! In future, I shan't speak to my minor at all. He's too jolly dangerous!"

"It's all right; he won't talk," said Church. "He promised me he wouldn't, and that's good enough. But you'd better be more careful in future, Handy. We don't want all the servants to know!"

Handforth swallowed the insult without a word. He knew that he deserved it, for he had certainly been very reckless. The juniors went in to breakfast, and the affair was temporarily put aside.

As soon as breakfast was over the eight would-be explorers managed to get together in the hall for a few minutes. They were Pitt and Grey, Watson and Tregellis-West, Archie and Handforth & Co. The rest of the schoolboy guests were in total ignorance of the affair, except Ulysses Spencer Adams, whose interest had waned. But he could be trusted not to give the secret away.

"Now then, Archie, what about it?" asked Handforth briskly.

"Oh, I say!" protested Archie. "I mean, just after breakfast, what? Kindly allow the digestive organs to work undisturbed for a brief period. The fact is, laddie, I was thinking about a slight nap——"

"All right; go on thinking about it!" interrupted Handforth.

"But, I mean to say, this skating!" pleaded Archie. "So frightfully energetic, don't you know! I absolutely must have forty of the best before venturing upon the ice——"

"You ass! Who's talking about skating?" said Watson. "We want you to show us that secret tunnel you spoke about last night."

Archie brightened up slightly.

"Oh, that!" he exclaimed. "The jolly old hidden passage stuff? Absolutely! My dear old greengage, I'm dashed relieved! You want me to buzz along, and show you——"

"Not so loud, Archie," warned Pitt. "Walls have ears!"

"Oh, rather!" agreed Archie. "And nowadays, dash, if we don't know where we are. I mean, servants whizzing about in platoons—footmen, and what not, to say nothing of squads of butlers. All these servants put a chappie off his stroke, you know——"

"What about that tunnel, you long-winded ass?" demanded Handforth gruffly. "We can't stand here all day listening to your ghastly accent!"

Archie winced.

"I say!" he murmured. "Good gad! Ghastly, what? I mean, I've always had an idea that my accent was somewhat fruity. Only last week Phipps positively assured me that I spoke like a bally dictionary. I don't wish to be impolite, old scarecrow, but kindly permit me to call you a dashed insulting chunk of refuse!"

"Why, you rotter, I'll biff you sideways!" roared Handforth.

"Dry up, Handy! Here come the girls!" urged Church. "Oh, my hat! We've lost the chance now. Archie's bound to slip off somewhere, and we can't find that tunnel entrance without him."

"Never mind," said Pitt quickly. "It'll do later on in the morning."

A minute later Irene & Co. descended

upon the juniors, and the subject of secret tunnels and mysterious manifestations had to be shelved again.

**CHAPTER IV.
UNDER THE MISTLETOE.**



H ALLO! I thought you were going to be ready for going out?" asked Handforth, as he turned to face the girls. "You haven't got your hats or coats on, or anything. The ice is fine this morning—"

"There's an awful lot to do, Archie," said Marjorie Temple.

"But what about the dashed servants?" demanded Archie. "Why, for example, does the mater wrestle with fearful lists of monthly wages, and all that sort of thing? I mean, we're not here to work, dear girl; the whole idea is positively revolting. This is Christmas Eve—a frightfully ripping time of good cheer, and all that sort of jolly stuff—"

"This is Christmas Eve, and that's just why we want you to work!" interrupted Irene. "Have you fellows forgotten about

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"Yes, but we're going skating this afternoon," put in Irene Manners.

"This afternoon?"

"Yes; we shall have plenty of time then," put in Doris Berkeley. "There's important work on this morning, and we want you fellows to lend a hand. You'll all rally round, won't you?"

"Rather!" chorused the juniors, their hearts sinking.

"Work!" said Archie Glenthorne dreamily. "Oh, come! I mean to say, you're not actually going to start some of that fearful stuff they call work? Pray be reasonable, dear old things!"

decorating the ball-room? What did you promise me yesterday?"

"The ball-room?" repeated Handforth. By George! Of course! We've got to hang up the holly, and—"

"Mistletoe!" suggested Willy, with a grin.

"You go away and mind your own business!" said Handforth fiercely, giving his junior a black look. "As I was saying—"

"But you'd better not hang the mistletoe, old man," went on Willy. "If you happen to get underneath it you'll be kissed by so many of these girls that—"

Willy didn't get any further. Handforth gave him one shove, and he nearly turned a somersault backwards. And Irene & Co.,

looking rather pink, failed to remonstrate. They hastily continued the conversation about the decorations.

"To-day's the last chance, and we've got heaps of things to do," said Irene. "You know what decorations are; they'll never go right when you want them to. We've got hundreds of coloured paper streamers, and things like that. So all you chaps have got to help."

There was no getting out of it. The juniors were by no means delighted, but it was impossible to refuse. The skating was postponed, and so was the exploring.

The girls were very enthusiastic about the decorations, and they soon managed to infuse some of their own spirit into the juniors. And before half an hour had elapsed all were working with a will.

The ball-room was a wonderful place, and by the time the Christmas decorations were up it would indeed be worth looking at. Handforth & Co. and the others were soon busy with step-ladders, string, wire, and a dozen other things.

Willy strolled in and looked on. He was rather incensed. He had volunteered his services, but had been politely but firmly told that he wasn't required. Irene & Co. liked Willy considerably, but as a helper for putting up decorations he didn't strike them as being an ideal candidate. They knew him too well.

Willy stood looking at the scene with interest.

Irene was directing some work at the other end of the room, and she was wearing a bright red woollen sports coat, which rather suited her. Ena Handforth was in the middle of the room, sorting out a pile of highly coloured paper decorations.

"Well, if that's not asking for it, what is?" murmured Willy indignantly.

He had just noticed that his sister was standing directly under a great branch of mistletoe. It is quite possible that Ena was so engrossed in her work that she didn't realise this fact. But Willy had his suspicions.

"All right, blow you, I'll risk it!" he grinned. "I expect I shall feel queer for an hour, but it'll show her up, anyhow! Like her nerve to stand there as bold as brass!"

For Willy to make up his mind was for Willy to act. He ran lightly across the littered ball-room, grabbed his sister by the shoulder, and pulled her round. The next moment he implanted a resounding kiss on his sister's cheek which was heard in every corner of the apartment.

"I'll bet you didn't expect me to be the first!" chuckled Willy, backing away. "Oh, my hat! I'm all dizzy!"

"You—you little wretch!" stormed Ena, glaring at him.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The crowd looked on with keen enjoyment, and Ena took care to shift herself safely out of harm's way. Willy elaborately wiped his mouth and made a series of wry grimaces.

And after that little episode the work continued merrily. But Handforth minor stood by, looking thoughtful. There was a mischievous gleam in his eye which spelt trouble for somebody. He had a problem on hand, and he was wrestling with it.

But at last his brow cleared, and he grinned.

"It ought to be easy!" he murmured. "Just a little diplomatic wangling, and then we shall have the fireworks! Good old Ted! If I don't force him into this, I'll go without any Christmas pudding!"

CHAPTER V.

WILLY'S LITTLE WANGLE.



"**S**TRICTLY speaking, Willy had taken on a tall order.

The scheme in his mind was simple enough, but unless it was carefully engineered, it would certainly meet with failure. But the hero of the Third had a sort of genius for "wangling." His greatest assistant in this process was his supreme air of innocence—which never failed him.

Having made up his mind as to the exact procedure, he took stock of the ball-room. Irene was busy over in the far corner, superintending the fixing of an elaborate silken decoration. A small army of Fourth-Formers were performing the actual work, Handforth being prominent.

Ena was engaged in another part of the room, and she was so busy that she had removed her woollen coat. Willy had seen this at first—a very important point.

"Good!" murmured the fag. "Now for it!"

He walked across the ball-room, and sidled up to Tessa Love. She looked at him rather suspiciously. The ex-circus girl liked Willy, but she was always prepared for mischief.

"I say, Tessa—do us a favour!" murmured Willy.

"What do you want?" asked the girl laughingly. "I'll bet you're up to something wicked——"

"Who, me?" interrupted Willy, in surprise. "Wicked? You know jolly well I'm as good as gold, Tessa! I want you to get rid of Ted for me. Just a little jape, you know—not against you, though," he added hastily.

"I thought you said you weren't wicked?" laughed Tessa. "But what can I do? How can I get rid of Ted? I'm not a wizard—"

"I can't clap my hands and tell him to vanish!"

"Perhaps not, but you can do something nearly as good," retorted Willy. "The gardeners are cutting holly this morning, and a whole heap of it will soon be brought in. I want you to ask Ted to buzz out and

"Oh, all right, Tessa—if you really want the stuff!" growled Handforth at length. "But they're bringing it almost at once—"

"Oh, Ted! I want it now!" said Tessa pleadingly.

"Good enough! I'll be back in five minutes!" said Handforth, hurrying away.

But before he reached the door, Willy was there waiting—lounging against the

The snowball, despatched with unerring aim, burst with beautiful precision over the ample features of Ferris, the staid and portly butler of Glenthorne Manor.



bring in an armful at once. That's all, Tessa. He'll do it like a shot if you ask him."

Tessa's sparkling eyes expressed their doubts.

"I'm sure I oughtn't to," she said. "You're such a little terror, you know. All right, Willy, I'll do it!"

"Good man!" said Willy heartily. "I knew you'd be a sport!"

Tessa chuckled, and walked over to Edward Oswald. She spoke to him for a few moments, and he looked rather blank. Willy hovered near by, apparently deeply interested in a big basket of flowers.

post as though he had been fixed in that position for an hour. Handforth gazed at him icily as he was about to pass through.

"Still hanging about?" he commented. "What's the game now? It was like your giddy nerve to kiss Ena under the mistletoe!"

"Fine! You couldn't have helped me better!" said Willy. "I—I mean, I wanted to talk about Ena. My hat! I can still taste that kiss! I wonder why sisters are always so jolly beastly to kiss!"

"You young rotter!" snorted Handforth. "Ena's all right—and if you try any more of those games, I'll tan you!"

"I'll bet you wouldn't do what I did!" jeered Willy. "You haven't got the nerve! You wouldn't kiss Ena under the mistletoe!"

Handforth sniffed.

"She's not under the mistletoe—so you needn't worry!" he replied. "Now get out of my way—I want to get by—"

"Hold on!" said Willy. "About Ena. I'll dare you to go straight up and kiss her the next time you see her under the mistletoe! There you are! I've dared you! Yah! Afraid to do what I've done!"

Handforth breathed hard.

"Afraid!" he roared indignantly. "Why, you silly young ass—"

"Yes, afraid!" jeered Willy. "I'll bet you won't promise me to kiss Ena under the mistletoe the first minute you see her there! There you are, Ted! I've dared you—and you're afraid!"

Handforth swallowed something that seemed to rise in his throat.

"All right!" he said thickly. "All right, my lad! I'm blowed if I'll take a dare from you! The next time I see Ena I'll kiss her! Under the mistletoe, I mean!"

And Handforth stalked off, fuming, confident, however, that such an opportunity as he had mentioned would never arise. It was a safe promise, and he had squashed his minor very effectively.

But Handforth would have changed his opinion if he could have seen Willy's gleeful face at that moment. The fag performed one or two capers, and then proceeded with his deep scheme.

He hurried across to Ena, and his manner had become urgent and breathless.

"I say," he panted, "you're wanted, sis!"

"Oh, go away, Willy!" commanded Ena tartly. "Don't bother me now—"

"But Mrs. Glenthorne wants you!" insisted Willy. "You might find her at the end of the north wing. Go on—quick! It's important! She'll be ratty if you don't turn up!"

"Better go, old girl," said Agnes Christine, who was near by. "Mrs. Glenthorne may want to give you those floral wreaths. She said she was getting them ready this morning."

"So she did," said Ena. "All right—I shan't be long!"

She hurried off, and Willy gave another inward chuckle. It was easy! And everything was conspiring to help him. By a very simple process, Willy had got rid of his brother and sister. And now came the one difficult part of his plot. And speed was essential. Handforth would be back within three minutes now, and not a second must be lost.

Willy seized his sister's woollen jacket and boldly marched across to Irene.

CHAPTER VI.

HANDFORTH ACCEPTS THE BAIT.



"F"ORTUNE favoured Willy again.

Irene Manners happened to be by herself—busy with a needle, making an alteration to one of the silk rosettes which were to decorate the doorway. Willy stood looking on for a couple of seconds.

"Blessed if I know how you do that sewing!" he remarked admiringly. "If I messed about with a needle like that I should jab my finger in two ticks! I say, I don't like that red coat of yours!"

Irene opened her blue eyes wide.

"You don't like it?" she repeated.

"Not a bit!" said Willy. "Red doesn't suit you, Irene. You're a jolly pretty girl, and I've always wanted to see you in black and white."

"Don't be so silly!" said Irene lightly.

"I'm not silly, and you jolly well know it!" retorted Willy, who could face a hundred girls without a trace of shyness. "Look here, this is Ena's sports coat, or whatever she calls it. Black and white stripes—fine! It's too good for Ena, really. Just shove it on, Irene. I'd love to see how you look in it!"

Irene laughed outright.

"You silly little donkey!" she said. "Why don't you go away? How can I do this work if you keep bothering me—"

"Oh, don't be mean!" said Willy, looking injured. "I'm awfully keen on this, Irene. It won't take you half a minute, and I'll bet you'll look topping! These black and white stripes will just go with your lovely golden hair! Come on—be a pal!"

Irene, thus flattered, began to thaw. She certainly suspected no ulterior motive on Willy's part. It was just a whim of his—and, being a girl, she couldn't help feeling complimented. It would be rather boorish on her part if she refused.

And Willy was getting anxious now—Edward Oswald was due to return at any second, and if he came in too soon the whole of Willy's preparatory work would be for nothing. Indeed, Willy was taking some very fine chances, but his usual luck was with him.

Laughingly, Irene took her own flimsy coat off and donned Ena's. It was her exact size, and looked fine on her. Indeed, she made a very charming picture in black and white. Willy stood back a little, and regarded her with his head held critically on one side.

"Jolly good; but you're too close for me to judge properly," he said. "Just take two or three steps backward, Irene. That's the idea! My only hat! You look wonderful!"

"I don't! I look ridiculous!" said Irene gaily.

All the same, she felt pleased. Even such nice remarks from Willy were pleasant to her ears. Unconsciously, she backed away, never dreaming that she was almost immediately under the mistletoe, with her back to the door.

"Now, Ted—come on!" muttered Willy anxiously.

The supreme moment had arrived. And if Handforth actually turned up it would indeed be remarkable. But he was due—in fact, overdue. And Willy had a final card up his sleeve. For if Handforth failed to appear, he would engage Irene in conversation and keep her in that one spot!

But this desperate move wasn't necessary.

Edward Oswald Handforth turned in at the doorway with his arms full of holly. Tessa hailed him enthusiastically, and ran up. At the same moment, Handforth caught sight of the figure in the middle of the room.

It was not surprising that he mistook that girlish form for Ena, for the black and white jacket was unmistakable. Moreover, the light in the ball-room was poor, the windows being heavily curtained. And both Ena and Irene were of similar size, and both had fair bobbed hair.

"Well I'm jiggered!" muttered Handforth blankly.

As he thought, he could see Ena under the mistletoe, talking to Willy! Without question, his minor had deliberately worked this. And Handy, having given his promise, couldn't back out! If he failed to deliver the kiss, Willy would expose him before the whole crowd!

"The young demon!" muttered Handforth. "Oh, well, she's only my sister!"

He strode forward wrathfully, in order to get it over quickly. And poor Willy nearly had heart failure when Irene half-turned. The fag had worked with might and main to keep her in that one position, and although the time had been brief, Irene was just getting restive.

"Well, Mr. Curious, are you satisfied?" she asked, commencing to unbutton the fatal jacket. "I've wasted all my time—"

"Just a tick!" gasped Willy. "I say, stand like that!"

The ordeal was over, for Handforth was on the spot. He grasped Irene roughly by the shoulders, and at that last second, even before acting, he had a dim suspicion that he had made a mistake.

But his actions were quicker than his thoughts.

"Look!" yelled Willy, at the top of his voice.

His shout came at the crucial second. The startled Fourth-Formers and girls turned from their various tasks and gasped. Handforth was in the act! He pulled Irene

round with a brusque twist, and gave her a big, resounding kiss fairly on the lips.

"Fine!" grinned Willy. "I knew you'd pluck up enough courage one day. I've waited weeks to see this!"

"Oh!" gasped Irene, starting back in dismay.

Handforth gazed at her dazedly. Until that second he had thought her to be Ena—but even as he was delivering the kiss he knew her to be Irene! He stood there, shaking all over. The one thing he desired that moment was to sink through the floor.

"Ted!" breathed Irene, crimson. "Oh, how dare you?"

"I—I—I— You—you—you—" stammered Handforth confusedly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled everybody.

Irene turned, and couldn't help laughing.

"Well, it was under the mistletoe, anyhow!" grinned Doris. "Good old Ted! I didn't think he had enough pluck!"

"He hadn't!" howled Willy. "He thought he was kissing Ena!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Light dawned upon Irene in a flood.

"It was you!" she cried, pointing at Willy. "Oh, you little wretch! You made me put this jacket on on purpose!"

"Of course!" grinned Willy. "I mapped it all out in advance! Good old Ted! I'll bet that kiss was topping! You ought to be jolly grateful to me for giving you such a chance!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth didn't look at all grateful. He made one bound towards Willy, realising that here was his one chance of escape. Willy dodged like lightning, and sped out of the room with the pace of a hare.

And Edward Oswald Handforth tore after him. But the odds against the culprit being captured were exceedingly heavy.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECRET PANEL.



FOR the rest of the morning Irene was chipped unmercifully—by her own girl chums and by the St. Frank's fellows. But after the first shock was over, she took the joke in good part, and laughed as heartily as any of the others.

After all, being kissed under the mistletoe was quite a permissible affair. But it was doubtful if Handforth would have enough pluck to perform the salute under ordinary circumstances.

Willy had mysteriously vanished, and Handforth gave up the chase in disgust. He knew that he wouldn't find his minor until lunch-time—and by then his wrath would have subsided. Willy, of course, was

counting on this to the full. He knew his man.

The others were highly amused by Handforth's elaborate efforts to avoid meeting Irene face to face. And now that the affair was over, Handforth wasn't exactly displeased. And before lunch-time arrived he was positively feeling warm towards his minor.

He remembered that kiss vividly. And it wasn't such a bad recollection, either. But to even speak with Irene now made Edward Oswald feel intensely awkward. Surprisingly enough, although he was such a firebrand among his fellow-juniors, his shyness in the presence of girls was rather startling.

Directly after lunch the conspirators met again.

"Now's our chance!" said Handforth grimly. "We're not going to be dished this afternoon—we've got to explore the tunnel—"

"Oh, I thought you were going to kiss a few more girls!" grinned Reggie.

"Look here! Another word about girls, and I'll biff you over backwards!" said Handforth fiercely. "I've had enough chipping—"

"Sorry, old man!" grinned Pitt. "I crave forgiveness. I throw myself upon your mercy! Don't strike me, Edward—"

"Fathead!" snorted Handforth gruffly.

He looked round, and gave an expressive snort.

"Where's Archie?" he demanded. "We can't do anything without that lazy josser. Why the dickens doesn't he—"

"Skates! Where are your skates?" cried Doris gaily, as she came tripping downstairs, all dressed in furs. "We're just off to the river! Hurry up, you chaps—we want you for an escort!"

"Good-bye, investigation," whispered Pitt, with a chuckle.

Once more the amateur detectives were baulked. And it was again the girls who did the trick. It was, of course, quite out of the question to make any excuses. Apart from this, the juniors were only too keen upon skating. They turned out in force, and were glad of it, too.

The investigation was put completely aside. The sport out on the frozen river was of the very best, and when the young people returned to the Manor at tea-time they were happy, glowing, and gay. They were certainly enjoying themselves this Christmas!

And after tea the real opportunity came.

If the fellows had been sensible, they would have left the exploration trip until this hour in the first place. For during the day the great house was bustling and humming with life.

But now, in the sleepy period between tea and dinner, the chance was at hand. The gentlemen had retired for dressing—

and probably to indulge in a quiet nap. The ladies, including all the schoolgirls, had also gone up to their bed-rooms. For the task of dressing for dinner was a long, interesting, and important one.

The St. Frank's fellows were not so particular. Five hurried minutes in the bathroom, a clean collar, and the thing was done. Archie was about the only junior who needed a couple of hours with his toilet. Needless to say, he didn't get them.

For as soon as tea was over he was seized firmly, and rushed away to a small reception-room. The conspirators didn't go to their own special quarters—the Tudor room, which their host had set aside for their use. For the other fellows who weren't in the know would naturally congregate there.

"Now, then, Archie, at last we're ready!" said Handforth grimly. "You've got to show us the secret tunnel—"

"Absolutely impos.!" interrupted Archie firmly.

"My dear ass—"

"Several yards of sorrow, but the whole idea is out of the ques.!" went on Archie. "I mean to say, Phipps is absolutely waiting for me with dazzling raiment. I've got to dash upstairs and—"

"You won't do any dashing upstairs until you've shown us the entrance to that secret tunnel!" put in Pitt. "It won't take you five minutes. Archie, show us the entrance, and leave the rest to us!"

Archie's face cleared.

"Oh, rather!" he agreed. "Gadzooks, I hadn't thought of that! Follow me, laddies, and the trick shall be done!"

"His brain's acting at last!" said Handforth tartly.

They went along the corridor to the armoury—a fine, stately apartment, which positively bristled with suits of armour and war relics of every conceivable description. It was a kind of museum in which every exhibit had been used in actual battle by a dead and gone Glenthorne.

"Is the secret panel in here?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "I casually mentioned it to the pater this morning, and refreshed my memory, but he doesn't suspect a thing. The dear old boy is absolutely in the dark."

Watched by the curious, interested juniors, the youngest son of the house of Glenthorne went to the far corner of the armoury. The panelled walls looked exactly alike all the way round. But Archie evidently knew what he was doing, for he didn't hesitate.

Bending down, he pulled at several ornamental knobs near the skirting. And at the fifth attempt a dull click sounded. The next moment a panel immediately above moved noiselessly and mysteriously backwards, revealing a pitchy black cavity.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.



"GREAT Scott!"
"Well, I'm
blessed!"
"Begad!"

The juniors uttered surprised exclamations as they stared at that cavity. And

Archie beamed contentedly.

"Rather dashed priceless, what?" he observed. "I mean to say, we Glenthornes do things properly, if you grasp the old trend. Secret panels and underground passages, and all that sort of rot!"

"Yes, this is the real thing!" exclaimed Pitt tensely.

"Absolutely," said Archie. "I mean to say, what's the good of having a family seat if it isn't all complete? According to the paper, there used to be underground passages leading all over the dashed place—even up to the top of the house!"

"That would be a rummy underground passage!" grinned Jack Grey.

"Well, you know what I mean, dash it!" said Archie. "Most of them have got blocked up, or something. Time, you know, is a frightfully hard master. In the course of a few dozen centuries the landscape is liable to change a bit. But gather round, lads of the village, and——"

"Who's that at the door?" asked Pitt sharply.

They all turned and stared. The door was closed, but some of the juniors thought they noticed a slight movement. Pitt sped across rapidly, and flung the door open.

There was nobody in sight, but Reggie heard quick, unmistakable footsteps round the bend of the corridor. He dashed off, but was again unsuccessful. The eavesdropper, or watcher, had gone. And Pitt was convinced that he wasn't a guest.

"Couldn't find him, the spying beast!" said Reggie, when he returned. "One of the servants, I expect."

"Absolutely," said Archie, nodding. "I'm afraid some of these temporary footmen and other chappies are shockingly inferior. I mean, one of the bounders absolutely insulted me this morning. To my face, dash him! I reported the awful cove to Ferris."

"Well, we won't bother about the servants now," exclaimed Pitt. "Let's get down and explore this passage. Have you got your electric torches ready? Good! Then we might as well make a start."

Handforth, in fact, was already in the passage. And the other juniors eagerly followed. There was something exciting and mysterious about this affair. Exploring a secret passage in an old house is always an attractive proposition.

Even Archie was infected by the general excitement. He was very much of a boy at heart—just as daring and adventurous as

the best. He forgot that Phipps was waiting for him, and he crowded into the secret passage with his companions—careless of soiling his immaculate clothes.

This particular investigation was doubly interesting.

For it was connected with the strange affair down at the lodge. The young explorers were hoping to get to the bottom of that mystery. And this seemed to be the most direct method of doing it.

Pitt paused after he had moved a yard or two.

"I say, hold on!" he exclaimed. "Who's the last in?"

"I am," said Church.

"All right—close that door behind you," said Reggie. "We don't want anybody else to come nosing in here while we're away."

Church closed the door with a click. The panel was cunningly made, the lock being intricate and elaborate, in spite of its age. From the inside it would be opened by means of an ordinary knob.

"Don't be in a hurry, you chaps," exclaimed Pitt. "Just look at the floor. Notice anything significant? Come on, Handy—you're the detective! Let's have your learned opinion!"

Handforth gazed at the floor, clearly visible in the light from the electric torches. The passage was narrow, and the juniors were all in single file, with Reggie Pitt leading. He had squeezed his way past the others in order to assume this position.

The passage was rough and bare, only just high enough to accommodate the juniors in comfort. The floor was of oak planks—uneven, but sound and solid.

"What's the matter with it?" asked Handforth, at last. "It's strong enough—no fear of us falling through!"

"Poor old Trackett Grim!" sighed Pitt. "A born detective, and he can't see an obvious thing like this! My dear ass, this floor is in an extraordinary condition."

"I must confess, laddie, that I don't follow the trend," said Archie.

"How long is it since any of your people came down this passage?"

"Oh, years, dear old boy," replied Archie promptly.

"And yet there's not a trace of dust on the floor, but clear and distinct traces of mud!" said Pitt significantly. "Mud! And damp, too! Which proves that it was caked snow, lodged under somebody's heel, probably. This passage has been used as recently as yesterday!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Handforth blankly.

"What's more, it was used by somebody in the house!" went on Pitt. "And that's the most important point. But come on—we'll explore the place, and discuss it afterwards."

And the party moved forward into the unknown.

CHAPTER IX.

MORE DISCOVERIES.



REGGIE PITT led the way, and he made no attempt to hurry.

He moved deliberately, testing every piece of flooring before he walked over it.

And he kept his torch flashed on in a continuous beam. There were four other torches distributed among the rest.

So the mysterious old passage was well illuminated.

For some way it continued in a straight line. Then, after an abrupt turn to the left, Pitt found himself facing a yawning flight of steep stone steps. They were spiral, and wound downwards. The stonework was crumbling and cracked in many places, but still in a state of fairly good preservation.

"Better go easy here," murmured Pitt. "And don't talk much. There's no telling what we shall find at the bottom—but I'm suspicious. There's something very queer going on!"

"Coiners!" said Handforth brilliantly.

"You always think of coiners!" grunted Church. "I'll bet you're wrong, Handy. It's more likely to be a hidden treasure!"

"What ho!" murmured Archie, from somewhere in the rear. "I didn't know that we Glenthornes had a treasure lying about somewhere, but one never knows! I mean to say, a hidden treasure would be a somewhat topping discovery, what?"

Pitt led the way down the circular stairs, and the rest followed.

Down, down, the stairs being apparently endless. But at last, just when Pitt himself was beginning to wonder, he found himself facing a tunnel. It was very different to the narrow passage above.

It was wide, and well constructed of great stone blocks. The juniors gathered in a group, for they now had plenty of space. The roof was arched, and well over six feet from the ground in the centre. And there was a musty odour hanging about in the semi-stagnant atmosphere.

"Reminds me of one of those Tube subways!" said Handforth. "A bit mouldy, of course; but the chap who built this tunnel was sensible. He didn't believe in being cramped."

"But why build it at all?" asked Tregellis-West.

"The fact is, old dear, the Manor was a kind of fortress a few centuries ago," replied Archie. "At least, that's how the good old story goes. When there were rebels and things whizzing about the countryside, Glenthorne Manor was a regular haven of refuge for the poor bounders. I expect this tunnel saved many a neck, by gad!"

Without a doubt, the tunnel was a relic of those stirring days when England was torn

in the struggles between King and Parliament. And so stoutly had the builders performed their work, the tunnel remained intact.

The juniors were thrilled by the adventure, and they pressed on. There was no possibility of losing themselves. There was just this one tunnel, leading onwards into mysterious blackness. The explorers could always find their way back without difficulty.

There were no twists or turns. The subterranean passage led in a direct line. And the mysterious manifestations at the lodge were beginning to solve themselves. The sounds, without question, had really proceeded from this tunnel. But who had made them, and for what reason?

The juniors soon came upon a clue.

Against one of the walls some objects were propped. And when the young investigators came up, they saw that these objects were tools—shovels, pickaxes, and sledgehammers. And they were all new. Many, indeed, still bore the labels on the handles.

"Well, what do you make of this?" said Pitt grimly. "No decently respectable ghost uses a pickaxe or a sledgehammer! And these were never left by Cromwell's men, I'll warrant!"

"Fathead!" said Handforth. "They're nearly new!"

"I know it; but you're always so beautifully literal!" grinned Pitt. "But come on—I can see something else ahead. We're making real discoveries this time!"

The juniors pressed on, and after a little while they were forced to come to a halt. Instead of the tunnel proceeding openly, the juniors were faced with new wooden piles, masses of stonework, and loose soil.

The roof was in the course of being propped and strengthened. And the tunnel, consequently, was reduced to half its normal size; and further beyond the whole tunnel was blocked.

Pitt looked at the others with gleaming eyes.

"Now we've got it!" he exclaimed. "I'll bet a penny to a pound we're immediately under Lucy's room in the lodge!"

"Oddslife!" ejaculated Archie, staring.

"Lucy's room in the lodge!" echoed Handforth. "By George! I believe you're right! Men have been working down here just recently—all night long, I expect!"

"That's a good shot," nodded Pitt. "If they worked in the daytime, they'd be here now. And those mysterious knocks we heard were caused by these supports being hammered into position."

"But what about the creaks—and that picture falling?" asked McClure.

"Vibrations," replied Reggie. "If we only knew it, I expect the tunnel is only just under the surface at this point. That bedroom may be only two or three feet above this roof. When this tunnel was built,

you know, they didn't do things scientifically as they do to-day."

A brief examination proved that further progress was impossible. And yet Pitt could see an opening. Among all the piled-up wreckage of the collapsed tunnel—a collapse which had probably occurred a hundred years ago—there was a small cavity.

Pitt flashed his light through it, and managed to peep beyond. The tunnel continued in a good state of preservation, just as before. Except for this one weakened spot, the old subterranean passage was in fine order.

"Do you know where this leads to, Archie?" asked Pitt curiously.

"As a matter of fact, no!" replied Archie. "That is to say, yes! I mean, there's a kind of priceless story that the Manor is actually joined up with Bannington Abbey—that old ruin in the middle of the town—"

"Then this tunnel must go right under the High Street," said Pitt, with a whistle. "Phew! Under the High Street! That's interesting—and significant, too!"

"Significant?" repeated Handforth.

"Yes," replied Reginald Pitt quietly. "In that part of the High Street nearest the lodge there's a big bank. Do you understand, my sons? A bank!"

CHAPTER X.

AN INKLING OF THE TRUTH.



HANDFORTH caught his breath in with a gasp.

"A bank!" he exclaimed excitedly. "You—you mean somebody's trying to pull off a big robbery?"

"What else?" said Pitt. "There's no workshop down here—no secret activity except the repairing of this tunnel. And why is it being done? Just so that the rest of the tunnel can be used!"

"Good gad, yes!"

"Looks like it!"

"You're as keen as mustard, Reggie," said Jack Grey admiringly.

"Rats—all this is obvious," laughed Pitt. "It only needs reasoning out. I'll bet a brace-button to my Sunday topper that there's a big bank robbery being planned!"

"But—but—"

"Wait a bit, Handy," said Pitt. "Just think of the circes. In the first place, we know for a fact that this tunnel leads under the High Street—and once this bad patch has been repaired, anybody can walk right along the rest of the tunnel."

"That's true enough, begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

"And it's a ten to one chance that the tunnel leads right under the huge building of the London and Home Counties Bank," continued Pitt. "According to my sense of

direction, this tunnel ought to lead within a few yards of the public library—and the bank's opposite!"

"Which means that this tunnel goes under the bank!" said Grey.

"Exactly!" nodded his study-chum. "Now, there's another significant fact—and the most important of all. It's Christmas time."

"Christmas time?"

"Yes."

"What the dickens has Christmas time got to do with it?" demanded Church.

"Everything!" replied Reggie. "All business is at a standstill, and all banks are closed. And there's a certain laxity about the police, too—a kind of slackening up all round. Could you imagine a finer opportunity for robbing the vaults of the bank?"

"My only hat!" muttered Handforth. "But—but even after they've rebuilt this tunnel, they've got to bore their way into the bank vault—"

"Not necessarily bore it," interrupted Pitt. "I expect they know the positions to an inch—they wouldn't start on a job like this without being certain. And the scheme, I expect, is to explode a dynamite charge, or something—and literally blow their way into the bank vaults. They're bound to make a big effort at the last minute. And their way of escape is always clear."

"Through the tunnel and then into the Manor?" asked Jack.

"Exactly!"

"Oh, but dash it all!" protested Archie, dropping his monocle. "Oh, really! Oh, but I say! Isn't that a bit frightfully suggestive, old investigator? I mean to say, you're absolutely implying that the Glenthornes are planning this dashed burglary!"

Pitt grinned.

"Not the Glenthornes, old man; but somebody connected with the Glenthornes," he explained. "For example—servants."

"Servants?"

"Particularly temporary servants."

"Good gad!" said Archie faintly, staring straight at Pitt. "One moment, old sunflower! In fact, two moments! Three would possibly be better! The old cogwheels are beginning to revolve in the gearbox! Kindly allow me a chunk of peace in which to think!"

"I'll save you the trouble, Archie," said Pitt. "Temporary servants, my son! I'll bet that's the solution of this mystery. There are several extra footmen at the Manor—expressly engaged for Christmas and the New Year. Between you and me, two of these chaps look ugly customers—and their manners are too sharp and aggressive for real footmen. I expect they came here with forged references."

"But—I mean— Look here—"

"Don't you see that this is their best possible game?" put in Handforth crisply. "They can work all day at their usual jobs, and then spend a lot of the night at this

excavation work. By George, what a crowd of cunning rotters!"

"I shouldn't be surprised if they're desperate crooks!" said Pitt. "Not just amateurs, but professional bank robbers! Masquerading as footmen, they don't even appear in the district, and they're safe from suspicion. And they can do all their preparatory work without even leaving the house!"

"It's—it's almost too extraordinary to be true!" muttered Tommy Watson. "And yet the facts are clear enough! Here's the tunnel, and here are the signs of activity! And we know jolly well the bank is only just down the road——"

"I say!" gasped McClure abruptly. "I—I heard——"

He paused, staring back along the wide tunnel.

"You heard what?" asked Pitt sharply.

"I don't know," muttered McClure. "But I thought I heard a footstep, or something! I say, those men may be down here——"

He broke off with a gasp.

For at that moment he had caught sight of some dim, creeping forms!

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIGHT IN THE TUNNEL.



HANDFORTH automatically clenched his fists.

"Who's that?" he demanded, his voice gruff with tension.

All the juniors' torches were gleaming down the wide, stone passage; but the light, although brilliant at close quarters, was not very penetrating. Yet, undoubtedly, some dim forms could be seen.

"Is that you, Willy?" shouted Handforth.

He knew it wasn't, but he felt he had to say something. And the forms came nearer. There were four of them. Pitt caught a reflected gleam of light, and he nodded grimly.

"A brass button!" he muttered. "Uniform! Yes, by Jove, we're trapped! These are some of the footmen! Quick! Make a rush for those hammers and pickaxes. There's going to be some trouble!"

The juniors were excited—and alarmed, too. They had every reason to feel the latter emotion. For if it came to a hand-to-hand tussle against four powerful men, there could only be one end to the battle.

As Pitt ceased speaking, he ran forward. The tools were leaning against the tunnel wall a little further back towards the spiral

stairway. The other juniors followed Reggie's example. But they were too late!

The four dim figures made a rush at the same moment, and reached the tools first. The torches revealed four angry, evil faces. Two of the men were attired as footmen, another was in chauffeur's uniform, and the fourth was in a nondescript attire—evidently a scullery hand.

The two parties faced one another, separated by a few feet.

"Why, dash it, you're Richards!" exclaimed Archie, staring at one of the footmen. "And you're Coleman!" he added, after glancing at the other man in uniform. "What, dash it, is the idea? You frightful bounders——"

"Stow that, kid!" growled Richards. "We've heard your talk—and there's no sense in keeping up a farce! You're on to our game, and that's all there is to it!"

"Then you admit you're bank robbers!" roared Handforth.

"Not yet—but you can bet we shall be!" snapped Richards. "We're not going to be stopped by a bunch of kids like you! Why, in the name of blazes, did you interfere?"

Reginald Pitt looked grim.

"I'm an idiot for allowing this to happen," he said bitterly. "I suspected that somebody watched us as we opened that secret panel in the armoury—and this proves it!"

"Yes, I saw you go in—and kept my eyes open!" put in Coleman.

"There's no need to blame yourself, Reggie," said Grey. "When we entered the panel we'd no idea that the affair was as serious as this. Look here, you men—you'd better let us get by——"

"Get by, eh?" snarled Richards. "Get by—and tell the colonel all about us! You'll have us pinched, will you? Not just yet, sonny! We've got our plans made, and we'll go through with 'em! You kids will have to stay down here until after Boxing Day!"

"What!"

"Good gad!"

"Until after Boxing Day!"

"But—but——"

"You needn't be afraid—we'll feed you!" snapped Richards.

"Feed us!" roared Handforth. "What about Christmas? We shall miss it all! Look here, you chaps, are we going to stand this? Come on—let's rush the rotters——"

"Hold on!" said Richards sharply. "I give you warning, young 'uns! Be sensible, and take it quietly. If you want a fight, we're ready—but take my advice and give in quiet. We know that you stumbled on this thing by accident, and we don't want to hurt you. Violence ain't our game. But if we're forced——"

"But—but we can't stand this!" broke in Handforth excitedly. "I'm not going to be kept here a prisoner until after Boxing Day!"

ANSWERS
EVERY MONDAY...PRICE 2:

Nobody knows we've come here—we kept it a dead secret! There's not another soul knows that we came down this tunnel——”

“Thanks!” exclaimed Richards, with relief.

“Eh?” said Handforth, with a start.

“That's just the point that was worrying me,” growled Richards, who was evidently the leader. “So nobody else knows about this little game? Good! When you're missed, they'll think you've gone out, and there'll be no search within the house!”

“Oh, won't there?” demanded Watson.

Their minds were eased. For they had only to capture these boys, and hold them prisoners, and the situation was saved. They could still carry on with their daring scheme, and the absence of the juniors would not be connected with the Manor itself.

In any case, it was the only possible course to pursue.

The four men undoubtedly comprised the entire gang. And Coleman, having seen the schoolboys entering the tunnel, had lost no time in warning his confederates. They had

Handforth was in the act! He pulled Irene round with a brusque twist, and gave her a big, resounding kiss fairly on the lips.



“Everybody will know that we didn't go out—our overcoats and mufflers and caps are indoors——”

“Yes, perhaps so,” interrupted Richards, with a grin. “But they won't be visible in half-an-hour from now! I'll take care to hide them up. And what's more, both Jem and I will swear blind that you kids went off skating on your own.”

“You bet we will!” said Coleman grimly. All the men were looking less dangerous.

left their duties for the purpose of dealing with the situation.

And a minute later the four men acted.

They advanced aggressively, and a short, desperate fight took place. While it lasted it was exciting—but the end was inevitable. Although the men were outnumbered by the boys, the latter were no matches for their desperate antagonists.

Serious resistance would have meant grave injuries. And Reginald Pitt urgently called

upon his chums to give up the fight. For Reggie could clearly see that these men were capable of murder in their present dangerous mood.

And the schoolboy adventurers were beaten.

CHAPTER XII

MISSING!



HANDFORTH fumed furiously.

He was a bit of a wreck. His left eye was rapidly closing and assuming a purple tint. His left cheek bore a nasty jagged graze, which was bleeding considerably. His knuckles were torn and raw. And he was bound hand and foot, with his back to one of the tunnel walls.

The other juniors were in a similar plight—although not quite so badly battered about. They had all fought gamely—but had desisted when they realised that Richards and his men would have brained them before letting them go.

"We did our best—so we can't blame ourselves," said Reggie Pitt quietly. "But I'm afraid the position's a bit hopeless. Adams is the only fellow who knows about that lodge business—but even he isn't in the secret about this tunnel. So he can't give any clue when we're missed."

The juniors were in complete darkness. The tunnel was cold and chilly, and all their late antagonists had gone. But Richards had made it quite plain that one of them, at least, would remain on guard on the stairs. And this one man, in such a confined space, would easily be able to keep the prisoners at bay—for even if they escaped from their bonds, they could only mount that spiral stairway in single file. And there was no escape from the tunnel in the opposite direction.

The prisoners were indeed bottled up. Their bonds were not even necessary. But Pitt suspected that there would be no man on guard at the moment. The crooks would seize an opportunity, every now and again, to leave their duties in order to slip through the secret panel to have a look at the prisoners. And later on in the evening, of course, the enemy would come down in force.

Escape was utterly out of the question.

"Well, this is a fine Christmas Eve!" growled Tommy Watson. "Stuck down here—prisoners! And we've got to be here all through Christmas, too! I wish we hadn't started the giddy investigation!"

"We all wish that—but it's too late now!" said Pitt. "And there's no need to despair. Something might turn up."

"I trust, old general, that something will!" murmured Archie. "I mean, this affair is somewhat poisonous. We shall dashed well grow chilly before long—and I can't even reach my bally handkerchief in

case I sneeze! That, I mean, is a somewhat horrid thought!"

"Christmas!" said Handforth bitterly. "Oh, my goodness! We've messed things up nicely! And while we're stuck down here, everybody else will be enjoying themselves and making merry!"

"I'm not so sure of that," said Pitt. "This business has spoilt everybody's Christmas. There won't be much jollification after we're missed—and after all the inquiries about us fail! Christmas is going to be a miserable time for everybody!"

"I say!" gasped Church suddenly. "I've just thought of something!"

"Anything important?" asked one of the others.

"Yes, rather!" panted Church. "You know we said that nobody knows our plans, and that this tunnel won't be thought of or suspected."

"Well, what about it?" asked Pitt.

"Well, we're wrong!" said Church excitedly. "Somebody does know about it!"

"Willy!" panted McClure, with sudden recollection.

"Willy!" shouted the others.

"By George, yes!" ejaculated Handforth. "I told him this morning—not deliberately—but he wormed it out of me! He knows about the tunnel and everything!"

All the juniors were buzzing with excitement now.

"Go easy—go easy!" warned Pitt. "One of those rotters may be listening—and then we shall have Willy brought down here to join us! Willy! By Jove, I've got faith in that kid! He'll do something!"

And all the prisoners felt tremendously heartened. As far as they could see, their fate rested upon a Third Form fag! But Willy Handforth was no ordinary youngster. It spoke volumes for his character that all these juniors became excited and tense. They felt that they could have faith in Handforth's young brother. There was something about Willy that gave confidence to the unfortunate prisoners.

In the meantime, everything was going on normally in the Manor.

Dinner-time arrived, and the guests assembled, gay and laughing, in the great dining-room. It was not until the guests began to seat themselves that the eight juniors were missed. Even then their absence only called forth a laughing remark or two. As the colonel himself observed, they would soon come rushing in, hungry and apologetic.

But this didn't happen. Dinner went through its full elaborate course, and the missing juniors failed to turn up. The host and hostess were now beginning to feel annoyed—but not anxious.

Anxiety didn't come until later.

When nine-thirty arrived, and there was still no sign of the missing eight, inquiries began to be made. None of the other juniors knew what had happened. They couldn't give any information.

It was only known that Pitt and Handforth and the rest had been seen just after tea, but not later. It was further ascertained that their overcoats and caps were gone—clearly proving that they had sallied out somewhere.

No strenuous inquiries were made after this, however.

"Infernal young scamps!" said Colonel Glenthorne. "I shall read my son a lecture when he comes back! I'll warrant they've met somebody they know in the town, and were invited home! But I can't be too severe, by gad! Christmas only comes once a year!"

And so, for the time, there was not even a search.

CHAPTER XIII.

WILLY DROPS IN.



WILLY HANDFORTH wrinkled his brow thoughtfully.

He was standing out on the terrace, under the starry sky. He had eluded his two chums shortly before, for he wanted to be alone, in order to think. And now he was working things out in his mind.

"There's something queer about this!" he told himself shrewdly. "Those chaps haven't gone out into the town! I don't believe it for a minute! They're exploring that giddy tunnel!"

Willy had hit the nail on the head here.

He remembered what his major had told him during the morning—and he had known, from his own observations, that no attempt had been made to explore any tunnel during the morning or afternoon. Handforth and Co., in fact, had been busy with the ball-room decorations all the morning, and had been skating all the afternoon. This also applied to Pitt and the others.

Therefore, decided Willy, the party must have gone off on the exploration stunt immediately after tea. The trouble was, Willy didn't know how to get into the tunnel. He hadn't the faintest idea where the entrance was. And it was no good searching for it among all the rooms and corridors of the Manor. It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Of course, he could go to the colonel and explain matters, but that would probably do more harm than good. For the whole business was a secret. Indeed, Willy couldn't say anything if he wanted to, for he had pledged his word not to.

And Willy's code of honour was strict. His word was his bond. Under no circumstances could he discuss the matter with anybody else. His only possible course was to act alone.

Willy had a kind of fear that something had gone wrong.

He didn't exactly know why, but something told him that the investigation hadn't

gone well. The eight juniors would never have stayed away from dinner unless a mishap had occurred.

Archie, for example, was a great stickler for etiquette. And Archie would never keep absent unless he was absolutely compelled to. And to breathe a word about the secret tunnel to the colonel was impossible—for two reasons.

In the first place, his pledged word wouldn't let him; and in the second place, if the juniors were all right they wouldn't welcome Willy's interference. So the problem was to decide what to do.

Naturally, there was only one course open.

And this was to have a look at Lucy Minns' bed-room in the lodge.

It was the only starting-point that Willy knew of. The mysterious sounds which had led to the talk of the tunnel had been heard there. The youthful explorers believed the tunnel to run immediately under the lodge. So to the lodge Willy went.

He found old Minns reading his paper in the sitting-room. Lucy, of course, was up at the house. She was sleeping there now, too. Her own little bed-room was temporarily deserted.

"Seen anything of our chaps, Minns?" shouted Willy.

"No, that I ain't, young gent," replied the lodge-keeper.

"They didn't come here this evening, I suppose?"

"No—not a sign on 'em," declared Mr. Minns.

"Do you mind if I have a look in the haunted room?" asked the fag.

"In the what?" asked the lodge-keeper. "Oh, the haunted room! Why, yes, young master, to be sure! Go ye along! If you'll be wantin' a candle, there's one on the little table just here."

They were in the narrow hall of the lodge, and Willy soon had the candle alight, and he retired into the mysterious little room. Mr. Minns, stolid and imperturbable, went back to his paper—and forgot all about Willy and his mission.

The fag shut himself in the bed-room, and looked round. He wasn't very impressed. As far as he could see, there was nothing here to scare anybody. And it was obvious that the other fellows hadn't been here.

Willy was on the point of going at once, but he thought better of it. He sat down on the edge of the bed, and remained perfectly still. He was thinking that he might be able to hear the strange tapping that had started all the trouble.

But no unusual sounds came to his ear.

"A tunnel underneath the ground!" murmured Willy. "It's a bit thick, but I don't see why not. It isn't impossible, anyway. And while I'm about it, I might as well investigate thoroughly."

He dropped to the floor, and stretched himself out full length. Then he placed his ear to the boards, and listened intently. Even as he did so, he half grinned to himself. He was only doing it for a lark—pretending to be a detective on the job.

But suddenly Willy gave a little jump.

It was his imagination, of course, but it seemed to him that he could hear faint voices—phantom voices. For they were so dim and far away as to seem almost imaginary.

He wondered if his sense of hearing was playing tricks. He pressed his ear closer, and closed his other ear with a finger. Then, keeping as still as a mouse, he listened again. Then he abruptly sat up.

"Yes, they're voices all right!" he muttered tensely. "And, by jingo, I believe I recognise Ted's. The bounders are actually under here!"

He looked at the floor with a kind of subdued excitement. And he noticed that some of the ancient boards appeared to be a trifle loose. There were wide cracks showing. And Willy suddenly came to a resolve.

He attempted to prize up one of the floor-boards, and to his astonishment it succumbed at once to his efforts. The next one followed suit. Willy peered down into the cavity beneath the boards. He could see nothing but dry earth—drab and uninteresting; but it struck him that if he put his ear to the ground itself he would be able to hear the mysterious voices much more distinctly.

Without compunction, he raised two more boards. Then he stepped into the widened cavity, and reached for the candle. But as he was in the act of doing so, the very ground beneath his feet seemed to quiver.

"Great pip! What the——"

Willy got no further, for it seemed to him that a miniature earthquake happened. He felt himself dropping. The very ground crumbled beneath his feet. He clutched wildly at the edge of the floor-boards, but failed to obtain a hold.

Then he went shooting downwards into the mysterious depths of the earth!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PLAN OF ACTION.



FOR one dreadful moment Willy believed that he was going to be buried alive.

As he fell, he had an idea that a crevice had opened in the earth, and that he would drop down for hundreds of feet—to be smashed into pulp when he struck.

Instead, he didn't drop sheer at all.

Half smothered, and blinded by dirt and dust, he fell through a kind of uneven hole—

so uneven that it hindered his progress. Then he got clear, and shot down in a heap—only to be brought up with a terrific jar a second later.

He rolled over and sat up, gasping.

"Where the—— What the——"

"That's my minor's voice!" came the tones of Edward Oswald Handforth out of the intense gloom. "What did I tell you? Didn't I say the young bounder would get busy on something!"

"Not so loud—not so loud!" came Pitt's voice. "We might be heard!"

Willy cleared his ears of soil and dust. He couldn't see a thing, for the blackness was intense. But there was no mistaking the voices—and they seemed to come from a spot comparatively near by.

Of course, Willy had dropped through into the tunnel—just at the point where it was being propped and repaired—where the actual stone roof had collapsed for good.

This spot, indeed, was immediately underneath the bedroom in the lodge—a simple explanation of all the mysterious sounds that had so scared Lucy Minns. For Richards and his gang had been at work directly beneath the unfortunate girl's bedroom.

Willy had only taken the floor up so that he could have a better chance of listening. But even his comparatively slight weight had proved sufficient to break through into the tunnel. The loose earth had evidently been disturbed and cracked by the rebuilding work.

And the fag had just shot clean down into the tunnel. He was shaken, bruised, and startled, but otherwise unhurt. And he was sitting on the hard floor only fifteen feet from the eight schoolboy prisoners. Willy rose somewhat shakily after he had regained his breath.

"Hallo, there!" he whispered. "Where the dickens are you?"

"Good old Willy!" came Pitt's soft tones. "I don't know how you got here, but you're worth your weight in gold! And if you've only got a pocket-knife on you——"

"I've got two!" interrupted Willy, as he felt his way forward.

"Don't strike a light—don't talk loud, either!" whispered Pitt. "We've been collared by a gang of bank robbers, and we're all bound up. Cut these cords, old man, and we'll be your slaves for life!"

Willy felt one of the prisoners, and got busy with his knife. After that, the rest was easy. Within five minutes, all the juniors were freed, and on their feet. And Willy was feeling inwardly excited and particularly pleased with himself.

"How did you do it, my lad?" asked his major.

"Blessed if I know!" said Willy frankly. "The fact is, I just dropped in! I happened to stand on the ground in Lucy Minns' bed-room, and I came clean through!"

"I say, you chaps, quick!" whispered

Pitt. "I can see a light up through that hole!"

"Yes, I left a candle burning," explained Willy.

"If we can only get up through this hole, we shall be all serene!" exclaimed Pitt tensely. "There's probably a man on guard at the other exit of the tunnel, and we daren't risk another encounter. I've got another idea, too! If only we can get out without Richards and his gang knowing, we can collar the whole bunch!"

Pitt soon put his suggestion to the test. He himself essayed the task of climbing through the natural shaft. It was a risky proceeding, as Pitt knew. For it was quite possible that there might be a serious collapse, in which he would be buried amid the debris.

But it was worth trying—and the temporary supports for the tunnel were strong and sturdy. Pitt examined the position closely.

Willy had dropped down a slanting rift in the ground—and it was not more than five feet from the top of the tunnel to the floor-boards of Lucy's bed-room. The tunnel had been built startlingly near to the surface at this point.

Pitt raised himself up, clutched at the loose earth, and wormed his way through. He expected the ground to give way any second, but he was wrong. The ground seemed safe and solid, and Pitt reached the solid security of the bed-room floor-boards without mishap. He was dusty from head to foot, but nothing more.

Then the others proceeded to come up.

Pitt obtained the assistance of the startled Mr. Minns—to say nothing of a stout length of rope. This latter was an enormous aid, for the juniors were able to grasp it, and were thus hauled up out of the tunnel.

"Well, thank goodness!" said Handforth breathlessly. "We're all out of that beastly hole—and it's only just after ten now! Still in time for some late dinner!"

"I say, dinner, don't you know!" protested Archie. "Dinner can wait, laddie. The first thing I need is a bally bath!"

But Reggie Pitt put his foot down on all such suggestions.

"There'll be no baths—and no grub!" he replied. "We're going to capture those confounded ruffians, and we're going to do it now!"

CHAPTER XV.

TURNING THE TABLES.



FERRIS frowned as the library bell purred.

"Them boys, I'll warrant!" muttered

Ferris testily. "The master's worried about 'em! If he wasn't, he wouldn't be in the

library at this time o' night! I thought he was safe in the billiard-room!"

The butler had been taking a quiet spell of rest in his extremely comfortable pantry, which was more or less of a sitting-room as well. He made his way with stately strides to the library.

He entered with his usual archbishop-like manner, and then paused in the doorway. Instead of Colonel Glenthorne facing him, the one and only Archie was lolling back in the most comfortable armchair. Otherwise the great library was deserted. Only the small desk light was gleaming, leaving the greater portion of the room in deep shadow.

"What-ho, Ferris, so there you are!"

"Why, Master Archie, I don't understand!" exclaimed the butler. "The master is anxious about you—and also anxious about the other young gentlemen——"

"The fact is, Ferris, old mountain, a few somewhat surprising things have happened," exclaimed Archie. "And I want you to do me a favour. I throw myself at your good old feet, Ferris, and all that sort of thing!"

"Anything I can do, sir, will be done willingly and quickly."

"Good man!" said Archie. "Stout lad! Er—sorry! Not literally, Ferris. Nothing personal, you know! I mean to say, you're a stout lad when it comes to rallying round! When you leave this apartment, Ferris, be good enough to refrain from passing the tip to the pater."

"Do I understand, Master Archie, that you wish your presence here to remain a secret?"

"Your brain power, Ferris, is absolutely staggering," said Archie. "That, to be exact, is the precise scheme. I can assure you, laddie, that there won't be much delay. And now for a few choice instructions. I want you to stagger forth and send Richards, the footman, straight to the library."

"Very good, sir. Am I to mention you, Master Archie?"

"Good gad, no!" said Archie, startled. "Absolutely not! Just tell Richards that he is wanted in the library—that's all!"

Ferris retired, closing the door after him. And Archie removed himself from the chair, and for some mysterious reason he disappeared into the obscure shadows of the library. He was rather pleased to do this, for he was very much of a wreck. But Ferris had noticed nothing unusual. Ferris was well trained.

There came a tap on the door, and it opened.

Richards walked in—and Richards was not without a few qualms. He had no fear that Colonel Glenthorne had any hint of the real truth, but close contact with the master of the house was not welcome.

"You rang for me, sir?" asked Richards respectfully.

He took a step forward into the room and looked round, surprised to find the apartment apparently empty. The next moment he had ample evidence that it was very full.

Something descended over his head like a cloud. It was pulled tight, and the next moment he was fairly swept off his feet by a rush of figures. Richards thudded to the floor, buried beneath a mass of muscular boyhood.

"Get him!" panted Handforth triumphantly. "Quick—his legs! Slip that noose over his feet!"

Richards thought he had gone out of his mind.

Here, in the regal privacy of the colonel's own library, he was pounced upon and captured by the very boys he had left imprisoned in the tunnel. As a shock, it was the worst one Richards had ever received in all his life.

His head was covered in a blanket, and then, before he knew anything else, he was bound and trussed up like a chicken. Then he was bundled out through the french windows and into the conservatory beyond.

"Next one!" panted Reggie Pitt. "The quicker the better!"

A few hasty preparations and Archie touched the bell. Once more he resumed his languid attitude, and once more the library seemed empty. Nobody could see the eight lurking figures in the corner, waiting to spring upon the next victim.

Ferris reappeared, masking his annoyance admirably.

"You rang again, Master Archie?" he inquired in rather a severe voice.

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "My interview with Richards was somewhat fruity—in fact, absolutely gilt-edged!" replied Archie. "Be good enough to send Coleman to me. And, Ferris, you needn't mention to Coleman that Richards has already had an interview!"

"No, sir," said Ferris, as he retired.

The butler dimly wondered if Archie had taken a turn for the worse. He had always suspected that "the young master" was rather rocky, and now his worst fears were being confirmed.

Three minutes later Coleman respectfully entered the library, and three minutes later still he was bound up, blanketed, and hustled into the conservatory to join his confederate.

After that Ferris became really incensed. Archie seemed to have a mania for inspecting the servants. This time he wanted to see a chauffeur. And after this fellow had failed to return Ferris was startled to receive an order to fetch a common scullery hand.

And Ferris said many choice things when he failed to find the scullery hand. So he returned to the library and reported. This time Archie bade him take a message to the good old pater.

And five minutes later Colonel Glenthorne marched in.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MERRY CHRISTMAS.



"GOOD heavens!" The colonel stood stock still in the doorway and started. He was in evening-dress, of course, and he was looking particularly hale and

hearty.

"Bless my soul!" he went on. "What's this? What on earth——"

He paused, words failing him. Nine ragamuffins appeared to have taken possession of the library. And one of them, amazingly enough, appeared to be his own offspring.

Among the others he recognised a badly battered Handforth, a grimy-looking Pitt, and a cheerful but dishevelled Willy.

"What in the name of all that's extraordinary have you boys been doing?" demanded the colonel in amazement. "Why didn't you turn up for dinner? And, above all, what are you doing in my library in this condition?"

"We've been capturing some bank robbers, sir!" said Handforth promptly.

"Some bank——" The colonel paused. "Fiddlesticks! What nonsense is this?"

"No nonsense at all, sir," said Pitt crisply. "If you will just allow me five minutes, sir, I'll explain."

And Pitt did explain, with the result that the startled colonel not only inspected the prisoners, but telephoned at once for the police. And he himself led the juniors through the secret panel in the armoury and down into the tunnel. The fourth member of the gang was caught like a rat in a trap.

He had been on guard on the stairs, never dreaming that the prisoners had escaped at the other end. But there was no escape for this man that way, for the exit had been blocked.

By the time they had taken their prisoner to the conservatory the police had arrived. None of the other guests knew of these happenings. And so there was no sensation or alarm.

To the colonel's delight Inspector Jameson was accompanied by Detective-sergeant Brownlow of Scotland Yard. The Yard man, it seemed, was in Bannington inquiring after two men who were badly wanted by the

London police. A report had reached Scotland Yard that these men were known to be in the district, but Brownlow had met with no luck.

"Well, gentlemen, I have a rather curious story for you," said Colonel Glenthorne. "To the best of my belief, I have four desperate criminals imprisoned in my conservatory. Perhaps you will be able to help me. In any case, I need your advice."

And the colonel, assisted by Reggie Pitt and Handforth, told the full story. The Scotland Yard man was looking very startled when he heard about the underground tunnel running beneath the bank.

"Why, these men I'm after are two of the most desperate bank robbers in the country!" exclaimed Brownlow. "I'd like to have a look at them, sir."

The detective-sergeant did have a look, and his report was not only satisfactory but gratifying. For it proved that the police had not been brought on a fool's errand. All four men were known to Brownlow, and small wonder! For they were a well-known gang! For months they had completely eluded the police and had caused the Yard a great deal of trouble.

They were carried off in triumph by the police, and Colonel Glenthorne promised to have the tunnel blocked up, so that no other crooks would be tempted to adopt a similar scheme in future. Richards and his confederates must have heard word of the tunnel from some former employee at the Manor—but this point was never quite cleared up.

The other members of the house-party knew nothing until the triumphant juniors came down, washed, dressed, and tidy. And then, of course, they were the lions of the party. They were the heroes of the hour.

And Handforth found it necessary to tell the story again and again. All the juniors, in fact, were called upon to recount the adventure. The girls were particularly excited.

"It's a shame we didn't have a hand in



Willy felt himself dropping. The very ground crumbled beneath his feet. He clutched wildly at the edge of the floorboards, but failed to obtain a hold.

the affair!" declared Doris. "These boys are always getting the best of everything. Lucky bounders!"

"Lucky, eh?" grinned Pitt. "Look at Handy. How would you like a black eye like that?"

"You leave my black eye alone!" said Handforth. "I don't mind admitting I'm proud of it!"

If Handforth was proud of it, so were the Moor View girls. For it was a mark of honour. And Irene was particularly sweet to Handforth after that, so sweet, indeed, that several juniors expected to see them under the mistletoe again.

Christmas at Glenthorne Manor was a gay and joyous occasion.

The juniors decided that they had never enjoyed themselves more, and that it was the happiest and jolliest Yuletide they had ever spent.

And there was plenty of fun left yet for the holidays. For three days after Christmas they would journey to London to be the guests of Lord Dorrimore. Then there would be a round of pantomimes and other jollities. And after that a short stay at Grey Towers with Jack Grey's people,

THE END,



(NOTE.—If any readers care to write to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon any remarks that are likely to interest the majority. If you have any grumbles—make them to me. If you have any suggestions—send them along! Remember, my aim is to please as many of you as I possibly can. All letters should be addressed to me personally, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, the Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.—E.S.B.).

Letters received: L. Chapman (Toronto), J. Parr (Platt Bridge), D. T. Lloyd (Bristol), Peter Setford (East Ham), "Four Lambethians," Enthusiastic (Hanley), Fred Allison (York), Edwin H. Meadows (Alton), F. G. Pont (Catford), Mrs. Wilson (Selhurst), "Tarzan" (Putney), "Tom Mix" (Portsmouth), B. H. (E.C.), G. F. Davies (S.W.11), R. Tarrant (Lewisham), S. Slack (Audenshaw), L. G. H. (Forest Hill), John Wilkins (Dorset), E. S. Best (Tooting), W. Johnson (Folkestone), Arthur Oakley (Bethnal Green), "Specs" (Forest Gate), M. Lindeman (Streatham), "Diehard," L. L. Collins (Brighton), "A Staunch Reader" (Clayton-le-Moors), H. Frederick Mullett (Northay), Ethel Ormerod (Accrington), "Devoted Reader" (Euston), R. Sturgeon (Walton), Hubert Barrett (Huddersfield), J. H. Wright (Broadstairs), D. E. Crawford (Wood Green), D. M. (Wandsworth), Basil Courtney (Bridport), Harold Keylock (Birmingham), Thomas O'Neill (Ponders End), S. R. Wilton (Plymouth), "Gip" (Durham), Mary Wolfe (Cardiff), Code Name (Ilfracombe), Pat McSweeney (Paddington), A. J. Tregellis (Canonbury).

As a matter of fact, I have received more letters than the batch mentioned above—but if I acknowledge them this week I shall have very little space left for anything else. That wouldn't do, would it?

I am rather worried. So many of you ask interesting questions that really need individual answers, and in some of your letters you say that you will be confidently looking for a reply in a few weeks. Well, as I

think you know, there's nothing I'd love better than to answer you all in full. But in order to do so I should require six or seven pages of the Old Paper, and that would knock a nasty hole in the Magazine or the detective story, wouldn't it? All I can really do is to acknowledge your letters, and thank you for them, and hope you'll write again, and deal with them in a different kind of way.

By the way, I get so many expressions of interest in this page that I want to thank you for being so keen about it. And as soon as I get the opportunity—I'm afraid it won't be for a few weeks yet, though—I'm going to try to increase my space to two pages. Then I shall have more room to spread myself, and I might even include some more American Notes, as these have been—to my astonishment and delight—in such great demand. And when I get two pages to deface with my rubbish, I hope I shall be able to go back to some of your present letters and deal with questions which I am at present compelled to shelve. You understand the idea, don't you?

Meanwhile, the most important question of all—THE one and only question, so to speak—is being settled. That sounds a bit Irish, if you look into it; but who cares? And look how many lines I fill up! I'm talking about Nelson Lee and Nipper coming back. Well, it's settled.

They're coming—they're on the way.

How's that? Do I hear groans, or cheers? A few very feeble groans, I fancy, and a multitude of hearty cheers. In a fortnight, the New Year series commences, and after these stories have run their course—Oh, well, we don't want to get too far ahead, do we? Let's confine ourselves to the immediate future. And next week I shall have some important hints to give you about the new series. I fancy I have written some stories which will appeal to you as much as the Dr. Karnak series, the William K. Smith series, and the Hunter the Hun series all rolled into one!



The Mysterious Kidnappers!

A Story of the Strange Mystery connected with Hollowdene Manor, in the investigation of which, Eileen Dare, the plucky girl detective, takes a leading part with Nelson Lee and Nipper

CHAPTER I.

NICHOLSON'S STUBBORN SILENCE.

"GOOD heavens, Mary, what on earth is the matter?"

The question was asked in the anxious voice of Mason, butler at Hollowdene Manor, and there was every cause for him to betray surprise and consternation.

A few minutes earlier he had been startled by the sound of a cry—an urgent, hoarse cry for help, which had echoed through the old building in the most eerie manner.

As quickly as possible, Mason had donned a dressing-gown, and had hurried downstairs. The mysterious cry had aroused him from sleep, but he was quite sure that the sound had been real, and not a phantom of his dreams.

And now, upon reaching the gloomy lounge hall, Mason was confronted by the spectacle of a girl kneeling beside the prostrate form of his master, who lay stretched at full length upon the carpet. She looked up quickly as the butler appeared, and her expression seemed to be one of intense relief.

"Oh, thank goodness you've come!" she exclaimed. "Something dreadful must have occurred to Dr. Nicholson! He's—he's unconscious, Mr. Mason, and he looks terrible! Did you hear that awful cry——"

"Yes; that's what brought me down," said the butler, looking at the senseless form of his master apprehensively. "What—what can have happened to make him call out like that——"

"I don't know," cut in the girl, a little sharply. "But it's no good us talking here. We must do something to revive him, Mr. Mason. If you'll get some water I'll bathe his head."

Mason nodded, and hurried off at once, wondering, almost subconsciously, how it

was that a mere maidservant should be able to retain her level-headedness at such a time as this.

For there was no doubt that "Mary Aldridge"—the girl in question—was intensely practical, and singularly free from "nerves." She had only arrived at Hollowdene Manor a few hours before, and, despite the weird and uncanny nature of the place, she was quite unaffected by her strange surroundings.

But this, in the circumstances, was scarcely surprising.

For the trim, brown-eyed maidservant was none other than Miss Eileen Dare, the celebrated lady detective, and she had been installed in her present "situation" by Nelson Lee, the famous crime investigator of Gray's Inn Road.

Lee, as a matter of fact, was quite close by. Only a moment before Mason's appearance in the hall the detective—in company with his assistant, Nipper—had hurried out of the house in order to make a search of the grounds, and the pair were even now engaged in their task.

Nelson Lee was on the track of a mystery.

A few nights earlier he and Nipper, while motoring from St. Albans to London during a violent thunderstorm, had witnessed a tragedy on the steps of Hollowdene Manor—an old building situated in a lonely part of the main road in the vicinity of Little Barling, near Watford. Their car had been brought to a standstill on account of a fallen tree, and, almost at the same instant, Lee and Nipper had heard a girl's terrified scream, and had seen her collapse upon the sodden drive as a flash of lightning had ripped across the heavens.

Investigation had convinced Lee that the girl—a servant named Ellen Bennett—had died from fright. But Dr. Jeremy Nicholson, the owner of the Manor, had insisted that she had succumbed to an attack of heart-failure. He had repeated his state-

ment at the subsequent inquest, with the result that a verdict of "natural causes" had been returned.

But Nelson Lee was not satisfied.

He believed that a great mystery surrounded Hollowdene Manor and its owner, and he was determined to get to the bottom of it.

So he had arranged for Eileen Dare, his lady assistant, to take the place of the dead girl, and she was now installed within the Manor as "Miss Mary Aldridge," sister of Betty Aldridge, the second maidservant in the employ of Dr. Nicholson. Betty, of course, was aware of Eileen's real identity, but Mason, the butler, and his wife, had accepted her as Betty's sister without question.

And Eileen, even during her first few hours at the Manor, felt convinced that Nelson Lee had been right, for undoubtedly there was a mystery surrounding both the house and its master.

A short time ago she had seen Dr. Nicholson prowling about with a loaded revolver, and had witnessed the entry of a burglar—a man who threatened the doctor with dire consequences unless a sum of money was handed to him. Fortunately, the blackmailer had become frightened, and had decamped, and Eileen had been promptly ordered to bed.

But she had not gone to bed.

Instead, she had made a search for the blackmailer, and had observed a foreign-looking man in the grounds. A few moments later she had been delighted to see Nelson Lee and Nipper, who had travelled down from London in order to satisfy their curiosity regarding Eileen's safety.

Quickly they had compared notes—Eileen telling them what she had seen and heard within the Manor, and Lee explaining that they had seen the blackmailer and his pal, and had traced them to an inn in the village. At that moment they had been startled by Dr. Nicholson's weird cry for help, and they had quickly rushed into the hall.

A brief examination had told the detective that Nicholson was not much hurt, but he had been puzzled by some finger-marks upon the doctor's throat. He was alone in the hall, and there was nothing to account for either the marks or the cry.

And Lee, after warning Eileen to keep his own and Nipper's presence a secret, had left the house to make a search of the grounds, leaving the girl to revive Dr. Nicholson. Before she could do so, however, Mason had made his appearance, having been disturbed by the terrible cry which had rung through the building.

Others, too, had also been aroused from their sleep, for before the butler returned with the water, Mrs. Mason, accompanied by Betty Aldridge, came tremblingly into

the hall, and inquired fearfully of Eileen what had occurred.

But the lady detective was just as much in the dark as they were.

She had heard the cry, and had found Dr. Nicholson prone upon the carpet, where he was still stretched in an unconscious condition. Beyond that Eileen knew nothing.

A few moments later Mason came hurrying in with a bowl of water, and the lady detective lost no time in gently dabbing the doctor's forehead and temples with a moistened handkerchief. She also forced a few drops of water between Nicholson's tightly-closed lips, and awaited the result with an anxious expression. The three servants stood by, looking scared and apprehensive.

The effects of Eileen's efforts were soon apparent, and Dr. Nicholson, after a few deeply-drawn breaths, attempted to raise himself into a sitting posture, assisted by Eileen. His features were very white and drawn, and he looked extremely dazed and shaken.

He seemed to recover his wits with remarkable quickness, however, and he looked at Eileen fixedly, and then transferred his gaze to the three startled servants.

"What—what does this mean?" he asked in a harsh, grating voice. "Why are you all here—staring at me in this manner?"

"We—we heard you scream for help, sir," said Eileen, never for a moment forgetting the character she was playing. "You gave a terrible cry, and we all came here to see what was the matter——"

Dr. Nicholson struggled to his feet, and a look of annoyance passed over his features.

"I—I must have come over dizzy and fallen," he muttered. "I scarcely recall what happened. However, I am all right again now, and I am sorry to have disturbed you all——"

"But you called for help, sir!" put in the butler quickly. "We thought that you were in danger——"

"No, no, Mason—I am all right," said Nicholson, placing his hand upon his throat as if in pain, and then quickly withdrawing it. "I remember now. I called out for help as I was falling. A passing faintness, I suppose—nothing more. I will go to my room at once, and you had better all go back to bed immediately."

He lurched off somewhat unsteadily as he spoke, and Eileen looked after him with a queer expression upon her pretty face. Why had Dr. Nicholson made no mention of the marks upon his throat? Why had he pretended that his cry for help had been brought about by his own faintness?

Obviously, such an explanation of the events was exceedingly thin, and did not deceive Eileen for a moment. She knew that Nicholson had been brutally attacked by some unknown enemy, and that he would



"Well, upon my soul!" ejaculated the detective. "Jenkins, apparently, does not relish the interior of the Manor! Did you see his face, Nipper?"

probably have been killed but for the timely arrival of herself and Lee and Nipper, whose sudden appearance had no doubt frightened the intruder away.

The lady detective was very mystified as she went up to her bed-room, and it was the same with Betty Aldridge and with Mason and his wife. They, too, were quite at a loss to account for the night's events, but, in all probability, they had accepted their master's explanation as the true one.

Eileen was very thoughtful as she undressed herself, but she was greatly comforted by the thought that Nelson Lee and Nipper were so close at hand. And she resolved to do her utmost to solve the riddle of Hollowdene Manor—by keeping her sharp eyes and ears very wide open within that house of mystery.

CHAPTER II.

A FEW DEDUCTIONS.



“**C**OME along, young ‘un—six o’clock!” Nelson Lee, with a quick pull, yanked the bedclothes from his slumbering assistant as he spoke, and Nipper sat up with a startled grunt.

“Here, I say—go easy, guv’nor!” he protested, with a shiver. “It’s a bit too thick to play tricks of this sort when it’s jolly nearly freezing! What’s the idea of routing me out so dashed early?”

“Work!” said the detective. “You and I are going to have a look round the grounds of Hollowdene Manor, and it’s important that we arrive before the inhabitants are stirring. ‘I’ll give you five minutes to get yourself ready!’”

Nipper nodded gloomily, and jumped out of bed. He knew that it would be useless for him to protest, and he had no desire to be left out of his master’s plans.

The previous night, after leaving Eileen Dare beside the prostrate form of Dr. Jeremy Nicholson in the lounge hall of the Manor, Lee and Nipper had made a very thorough search of the grounds, but they had seen absolutely no trace of the foreigner whom Eileen had mentioned.

But the detective was by no means surprised at this.

He knew that his lady assistant would not have made her statement regarding the stranger without good grounds, and Lee had no doubt that Eileen had been right in her surmise that the man she had seen was not English. Eileen was not the sort of girl to imagine a thing of that sort, and therefore Lee placed a good deal of importance upon her word.

What she had said was borne out very forcibly, too, in what had occurred within the Manor. Obviously, somebody had been

responsible for the attack which had been made upon Dr. Nicholson, and it was only feasible to attribute that attack to the mysterious foreigner.

Who he was, or what his purpose could be, was by no means clear; but then nothing was clear in connection with this queer business. The owner of the Manor was a mystery man himself, and he appeared to be enveloped in a perfect maze of sinister happenings.

For, in addition to the sudden death of the maid-servant, Ellen Bennett, and the appearance of the prowling foreigner, there was also the blackmailing burglar and his companion to be accounted for. Who were they, and what was their purpose in staying in the neighbourhood?

So far, Lee and Nipper had only seen them in the dark, but they knew that they were staying at the same inn as themselves—that they were, in fact, sleeping in adjacent bed-rooms at this very moment.

The whole case seemed to be bristling with mystery, and Nelson Lee vowed that he would leave no stone unturned to get to the bottom of it. And he intended, by way of commencement, to make an attempt to locate the foreigner.

Accordingly, he and Nipper—who was soon ready—left the inn, and hurried towards the Manor. The morning was fine and clear, but not frosty, as Nipper had intimated, and the pair soon reached the spot within the Manor grounds where Eileen had seen the stranger.

And within five minutes Nelson Lee had picked out the man’s footprints, and was following them across country towards a near-by common. There were very few men who were more expert in the art of trailing than the famous detective, and his prowess in this respect almost equalled that of the black trackers of Australia. Years of experience, coupled with his keen observation, had given him this power, and he frequently made the fullest use of it.

It was so in this instance, and Lee was soon making his way towards an old ramshackle hut which stood on the common—almost within sight of the Manor. The place was a mere dilapidated shack, but the detective seemed to be greatly interested.

Upon entering, he cast a quick look round, and he then proceeded to examine the floor with great thoroughness, picking up one or two cigarette-ends, and a few odds and ends which seemed to be crumbs. Nipper looked on silently for a time, and then his curiosity got the better of him.

“What’s the idea of all this, guv’nor?” he asked. “I don’t see the good of gathering cigarette-ends and crumbs—”

“Possibly you don’t young ‘un,” interrupted the detective. “But I fancy that the odds and ends we have found here will go a long way to establishing the nationality of the fellow whom Miss Dare saw.

And that, in all probability, will help us in our investigation."

Nipper stared.

"You mean to say that you can tell from these?" he queried, pointing to the collection which Lee had got together.

"Yes, I think so," returned the detective. "These crumbs, Nipper, are scraps of food which is habitually eaten by Orientals and the cigarette-ends serve to confirm my theory that we are dealing with Chinamen! I think that there were two Chinamen here last night, and one of them, no doubt, was responsible for the marks which we saw upon Dr. Nicholson's throat."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Nipper. "That's the limit, guv'nor! I know you're hot stuff when it comes to making deductions, but this puts the lid on it!"

"Nonsense!" said Lee. "The matter is quite simple, Nipper. These men, no doubt, chose this hut in which to hide until they were ready to act, and during their wait they partook of food and cigarettes. What their purpose can be, or where they are now, we cannot of course say, but as they apparently failed in their object last night, we shall probably see them again."

"You mean that they are out to murder Dr. Nicholson?" queried Nipper.

"It looks like it," said Lee gravely. "What else are they here for? The doctor, according to Miss Dare, is greatly in fear of something, and that fear is a very real one, by all accounts. I believe he would have been killed last night but for his cry for help, and our sudden appearance. The assassin became alarmed, and fled—leaving his work unfinished."

Nipper nodded and shuddered. If his master was right, the case seemed to be developing along queer lines, with a good many blanks to fill up. But the lad knew that Lee, once he had set himself to solve the problem, would never give up until he had done so.

CHAPTER III.

EILEEN DRAWS A BLANK.



NIGHT closed down upon Hollowdene Manor, black and silent.

Within the gloomy grounds which surrounded the old house two figures were standing—the figures of Nelson Lee and Nipper. The pair had decided to take up their positions here, and to await developments.

During the day they had been able to do very little, but Nelson Lee, nevertheless, had not been despondent. His discoveries in the hut upon the common had placed him in possession of a very definite theory, for he was now almost certain that Chinamen were menacing the life of Dr. Nicholson.

In addition to this, the doctor was threatened with blackmail by the two

Englishmen whom they had seen in the grounds the previous night, and whose identity had then been a secret.

But Nelson Lee had recognised them at once when he and Nipper had returned to the inn after their morning expedition. The two men had then been in the bar, and in the daylight the detective had had no trouble in identifying them as Bill Jenkins and Walter Hayes—a couple of crooks who were well known to the Scotland Yard authorities.

These two gentlemen were professional burglars, and it was surprising that they should put up at the King George so openly and fearlessly. The fact that they were doing so indicated that they were quite unknown in the neighbourhood, and that they intended to commence operations in the district.

Those operations, according to the present outlook, seemed to be centred wholly upon Dr. Jeremy Nicholson; but exactly what hold the two men had upon the doctor remained to be seen. Obviously, they were out to blackmail him, for the conversation which Eileen had overheard proved this.

And Nelson Lee wanted to discover their purpose before he could take any action against them. At present, any move on the detective's part was impossible—for he had no proofs of any kind whatever.

And so he and Nipper had again taken up their stand in the grounds of the Manor, ready to do whatever might be necessary, while Eileen Dare was equally on the alert within the building.

The lady detective, in fact, was even at this moment keeping a very sharp eye upon the owner of the Manor—and Eileen had decided upon this course owing to Nicholson's obvious uneasiness.

With the approach of night, he had begun to prowl about the house, and it was abundantly evident that he was expecting some sort of developments to take place. Eileen saw him fingering his revolver on more than one occasion, and this gave her a good inkling of the doctor's state of mind.

What was he in fear of?

If he knew himself to be in danger, why did he not seek protection?

Nicholson had no idea that Nelson Lee and Nipper were anywhere within hail—and it is doubtful if he would have requested their aid, even if he had been aware of it. For the doctor seemed to be almost bowed down under the weight of his own secrets, and obviously did not desire any interference. His treatment of Nelson Lee on the occasion of their first meeting proved that he preferred to be left alone.

The situation was a queer one, but Eileen was determined to do her best to fathom what lay at the bottom of Nicholson's strange manner. Her duties as a "maid" were now concluded for the night,

and she was devoting her attention to "shadowing" the doctor.

After each of his prowling tours he always returned to his own private apartments, and the lady detective decided to make investigation of these mysterious rooms—rooms which Nicholson had forbidden any of his household staff to enter.

Accordingly, the girl stationed herself in a dark corner of the great lounge hall, and waited. As she expected, the doctor emerged within a very short time, and commenced his tour of the gloomy, ill-lighted passages. As a precaution, she watched him until he reached the end of the corridor, and then she turned, and darted towards the room he had just vacated.

With swiftly beating heart, and feeling like one of Bluebeard's wives might have felt when entering the forbidden room, the lady detective quickly pushed the door open, and peeped within.

Her first sensation was one of keen disappointment, for the room was just an ordinary, den-like apartment, and not at all like the "mystery chamber" she had been prepared to see. It was a typical bachelor's snuggery, with a big arm-chair, a desk, a side-table, and numerous well-filled book-cases.

The desk was littered with a mass of papers and books, in such a manner as might have been expected. There was absolutely nothing suspicious whatever, and Eileen pursed her pretty lips with chagrin.

"Well," she muttered to herself, "what on earth does the doctor want to keep this silly old room so sacred for! It's just ordinary, and there isn't anything mysterious about it—Ah! I wonder what's behind that door?"

Her keen eyes had by this time noticed that an inner door stood almost facing her, and she tip-toed towards it wonderingly. Perhaps this held the key to Dr. Nicholson's weird anxiety for secrecy; and if it did, Eileen intended to lose no time in penetrating it.

There must be some reason, she reflected—and a very strong one—for the owner of the Manor to be so tremendously particular about his apartments, and if that reason did not lie in this inner room, it must assuredly do so upon the further side of the door.

Quickly Eileen turned the handle, and found—somewhat to her surprise—that the door was unlocked, and secured merely by the latch. And then, as the girl opened the door, she experienced another wave of disappointment, which was not unmixed with disgust.

"A bed-room—just an ordinary bed-room!" she ejaculated, under her breath. "Oh, what a fraud!"

For a few moments she stood with the handle of the door in her hand. She scarcely knew what she had expected to see—but it was certainly not this commonplace, matter-of-fact, somewhat severe bed-room.

But it was just that, and nothing else, as Eileen quickly satisfied herself by a brief examination. It contained an old-fashioned suite of furniture and a four-posted bedstead, and there was nothing whatever of a suspicious or mysterious nature in it.

Greatly mystified, and very annoyed, the lady detective left Dr. Nicholson's private apartments without more ado, and returned to the hall—asking herself what possible reason the doctor could have for insisting upon such privacy.

The thing was a mystery—or part of the general mystery which seemed to pervade the Manor from end to end.

Eileen gave it up for the time-being, but she had no intention of being beaten. She vowed to discover what Dr. Nicholson was hiding, and why he was so scared after nightfall.

Then she realised that the doctor ought by now to be returning to his apartments, and she looked along the passage to the further end.

On reaching the extremity, she noticed that a small door which led into the grounds was unbolted, and she instantly guessed that Nicholson had left the house for some reason.

And Eileen lost no time in following his example.

CHAPTER IV.

BILL JENKINS' FRIGHT.



NELSON LEE touched Nipper's arm, and pressed it gently—as a warning for him to remain silent.

The pair were still in the grounds of the Manor, and it looked as if their patience was about to be rewarded—and after a comparatively short wait.

They had taken up their stand almost in the same spot as they had occupied on the previous night, and now, sure enough, they dimly perceived the figures of Mr. Bill Jenkins and Mr. Walter Hayes approaching.

The two burglars, obviously, were totally unsuspecting that their presence was observed, for they walked towards the house almost without making an attempt at caution. The Manor grounds were so isolated, and so obviously untenanted and neglected, that they probably considered themselves to be perfectly safe in any circumstances.

So much so that they even indulged in an audible conversation—carried out in low voices, certainly, but by no means in whispers.

"I'm going right inside again, Wal—and if I don't find confirmation of my suspicions, my name isn't Bill!" said Jenkins confidently.

His companion grunted dubiously.

"You'd better be careful!" he warned cautiously. "After last night, that old chap

might be lying in wait for you, with a club or a gun!"

Jenkins laughed.

"No fear!" he scoffed. "Why Nicholson was scared stiff when I spoke to him last night! I shall be surprised if he isn't waiting to receive me with open arms—and with that hundred quid in his hand! But I don't care whether he is or he isn't so long as I can find the proof of what I want. Once I've got that, we can make him pay up to any amount we like! We'll be on velvet then—with an income which will only be limited by the amount of the old chap's fortune!"

Hayes grunted again.

"Well, all I can say is, you'd better be careful, Bill!" he muttered. "I don't like the idea of this business much myself—"

"Rot!" cut in Jenkins, with a grin. "It's going to be the softest thing we've done for years! All you've got to do is to stop out here and keep watch, and leave the rest to me!"

Hayes nodded, and watched his companion make his way towards the house—walking directly towards the corridor window by which he had made his entry the previous night.

Nelson Lee and Nipper, from their position some little distance off, had seen and heard everything, and the detective turned to his assistant, and breathed into his ear.

"A pretty pair of scoundrels, young 'un!" he exclaimed softly. "They are preparing to get Dr. Nicholson into a trap, and to blackmail him to his utmost capacity!"

Nipper nodded.

"Yes, guv'nor—that seems to be obvious," he agreed. "But I don't suppose they'll get everything their own way—now that you're on the scene! What are you going to do—collar Hayes while Jenkins is away?"

"No," said the detective. "We have no charge to accuse him of. I think we had better follow Jenkins, and endeavour to catch him in the act of blackmailing Dr. Nicholson. If we succeed in doing that, we can hand him over to the police without more ado."

"Right-ho, guv'nor!" agreed Nipper readily. "But we shall have to be careful, otherwise Hayes will spot us, and give the warning."

This was perfectly true, of course, for Hayes was stationed in the grounds for that very purpose. At the least sign of danger, he would undoubtedly give some sort of signal to Jenkins, and that must be avoided at all costs.

By the exercise of extreme caution Nelson Lee hoped to creep to the window without attracting Hayes' attention. If he and Nipper could manage that successfully, the rest would be easy, for they could then enter the house before Jenkins could possibly emerge.

Like a couple of shadows the pair stole forward, moving with no more sound than

would have been made by a rabbit or a stoat. Certainly they did not cause sufficient disturbance of the tangled undergrowth to attract the watchful Mr. Hayes, and they had almost reached the window when a surprising thing occurred.

Without the slightest warning Jenkins came charging out of the open casement—literally hurling himself into the grounds, and dashing directly towards the spot where Lee and Nipper stood.

His features, as Lee and Nipper could see, were distorted by intense fright and fear, and he ran blindly. Even before the pair could move out of his way, Jenkins was upon them—his charging figure butting into them with tremendous force!

Jenkins' hurtling body sent both Lee and Nipper flying before they could save themselves; but Jenkins' speed was scarcely checked. Apparently he was oblivious of the fact that he had encountered any obstruction, and he continued on his way without pausing. A few moments later Hayes was in full cry after him—wondering what on earth had occurred to cause this sudden change of attitude on the part of his companion.

Lee and Nipper picked themselves up, and looked after Jenkins in astonishment.

"Well, upon my soul!" ejaculated the detective. "Jenkins, apparently, does not relish the interior of the Manor! Did you see his face, Nipper?"

"Yes, guv'nor—it was ghastly!" said Nipper. "Good heavens! I've never seen such awful fear in a man's eyes before!"

Lee nodded.

"You are right, my lad," he agreed. "Jenkins undoubtedly was very badly scared, and I am very curious to ascertain the cause. This business gets more interesting every hour!"

They looked after the fast-disappearing figures of the two burglars, and they could just see the hurrying form of Jenkins leading—running as if there were ten thousand devils on his track!

What was the cause of his sudden fright?

CHAPTER V.

DR. NICHOLSON VANISHES!



EILEEN DARE was right in her surmise, as she was soon to learn.

Her discovery of the unbolted door could only mean one thing, and that was that the doctor had left the house.

Nobody would even dream of unlocking this particular door—for it was very seldom used, and it led into a part of the grounds which had once been a lawn, but which was now a tangled wilderness of long, coarse grass.

Eileen wondered why Dr. Nicholson had

left the house by this means, and she quickly made up her mind to follow him and ascertain his motives in acting in such a manner.

The girl thought it probable that the doctor had seen or heard something suspicious, and was bent upon making an investigation. If that was the case, he might possibly run into danger. In fact, Eileen thought this was more than probable, when she reviewed all the facts. The only wonder was that Nicholson had ventured out at all.

She opened the door wide and passed out into the darkness of the garden. And almost immediately she became aware that three struggling figures were faintly visible at the further end of the patch of grass. Two of the figures were those of strangers, but the third was undoubtedly that of Dr. Nicholson.

He appeared to be struggling frantically in the grip of the other two, and Eileen, with a little exclamation of anger, dashed to the rescue. But before she had covered half the distance which separated her from her quarry, she caught her foot in a concealed root and fell heavily to the ground.

With an inward groan of pain and annoyance she struggled to her feet, and then found that she was unable to run owing to a bruised knee. And as she hobbled slowly through the grass she was helpless to extend the slightest assistance to Dr. Nicholson, who was then being rushed off in the grip of his captors!

Eileen could almost have cried with mortification and chagrin, but she decided

to do something more practical. The time for any sort of concealment had now passed, and she raised her voice and called lustily for Nelson Lee and Nipper, guessing that the pair were somewhere about in accordance with the detective's statement.

She was right, for Lee and Nipper heard her cries almost at once and came running through the garden towards her. Quickly she gasped out her news, and urged them to go to the rescue of the doctor.

"Quick, Mr. Lee, the kidnappers can't have gone far!" she said urgently. "I saw them go only a few moments ago, dragging Dr. Nicholson between them!"

The detective was surprised.

"Ah, right, Miss Dare," he said. "Nipper and I will go at once. It now seems evident that there are two sets of crooks after the doctor simultaneously, and the mystery seems to be getting deeper and more involved. You had better get indoors at once!"

Eileen nodded, and Lee and Nipper dashed off in the direction she had indicated.

There was no doubt that the detective was right, for the case certainly was becoming more intricate and complicated as it proceeded.

What were Jenkins and Hayes after? What had caused the former to become so terribly scared?

And who was responsible for the kidnapping of Dr. Jeremy Nicholson?

These questions were all very obscure at the moment, but they would probably be made perfectly clear when once Nelson Lee had got a proper grip of the situation.

THE END.

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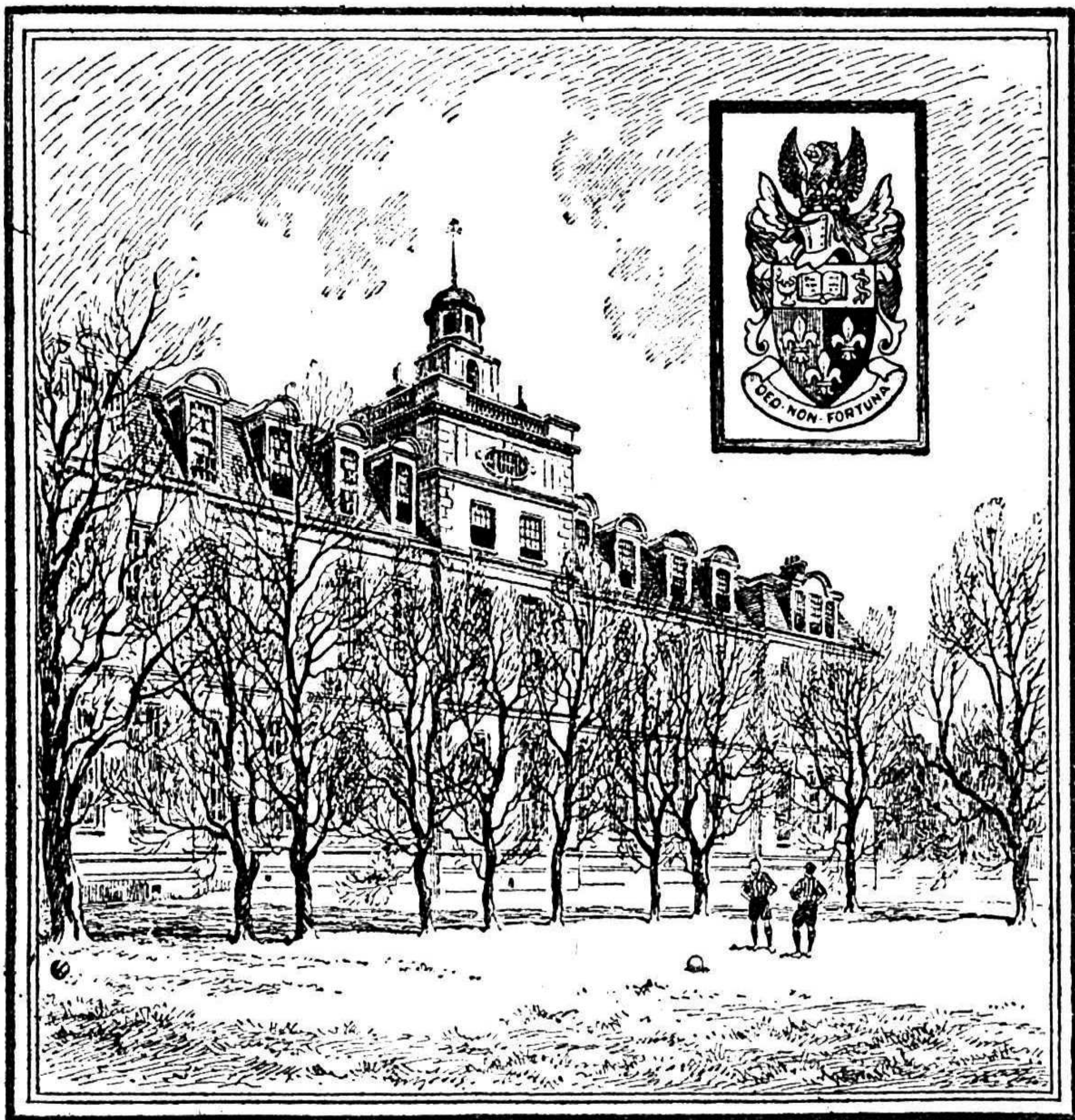


St. Frank's Magazine.

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OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS SERIES OF ART SKETCHES.

No. 58. EPSOM COLLEGE.

Founded in 1855 by John Propert, and incorporated by Act of Parliament in 1855, and by a second Act in 1895, Epsom College was intended to assist medical men to educate their sons well and economically. The number of boys is about 330, and these are divided into six Houses.

The College is situated on Epsom Downs in some 80 acres of land, and contains newly-built and fully-equipped science laboratories. The school is recognised as a "School of Science," and there are special advantages for those who are to study medicine.



Editorial Office,
Study E,
St. Frank's.

My dear Chums,

When you read these lines it will be just on the Eve of Christmas, although methinks you will have little opportunity to settle down to read anything at such a busy time. For there are Christmas cards and presents to buy and send off, letters to write to uncles and aunts, and we are worried lest we overlook someone. Annoying, isn't it, when a card comes from an old friend who has quite unintentionally slipped our memory, and we have no other alternative but to make amends by sending him a New Year card? That is why I always make out a list of names of friends to whom I am sending cards.

A GOOD OLD CUSTOM.

The custom of sending Christmas cards is not so very old, but it is old enough to have become as firmly established as carol-singing, the Christmas-tree, and Santa Claus, decking the home with holly and mistletoe. It is part of that feeling of goodwill, of keeping in touch, if only once a year, with our old friends, and so may it continue to survive for all time.

THE MAGIC OF CHRISTMAS.

With the shops all stacked with Christmas things, and crowded with busy shoppers, there is a glamour about these few days before Christmas such as one does not feel at any other time of the year. Busy preparations are being made in countless homes for the great annual festival, and the excitement reaches its height on Christmas Eve. Then comes Christmas Day, with its spirit of good cheer, of family reunion, feasting, and merry-making.

OUR LIVING MARIONETTE SHOW.

As a special Christmas feature this week, we have our Living Marionette Show, which

Goodwin explains how to make so clearly that any boy should be able to construct the apparatus without any difficulty. A great deal of fun can be obtained from this novel form of entertainment, and it will be worth the trouble expended on making it. The accompanying monologue, written for Handy's famous character, Trackett Grim, is intended as an example of what can be used for the entertainments. It could be improved by a certain amount of patter between the verses. I would suggest, as an alternative, that popular comic songs could be most effectively performed with this marionette show. The make-up, being very important, I have given a few hints, but, of course, much must be left to the ingenuity of the artiste.

THE GHOSTS OF GLENTHORNE MANOR.

We are having some lively happenings here at the Manor. It is the season for ghosts, and this place is supposed to be haunted. But, between ourselves, I think it is all bunkum. We have already laid one lot of ghosts—Willie Handforth and Co.—and I don't think it will be long before we get to the bottom of this other affair at the lodge. I shouldn't be surprised if it isn't a jape of some sort. Anyway, we cannot complain of a lack of excitement here.

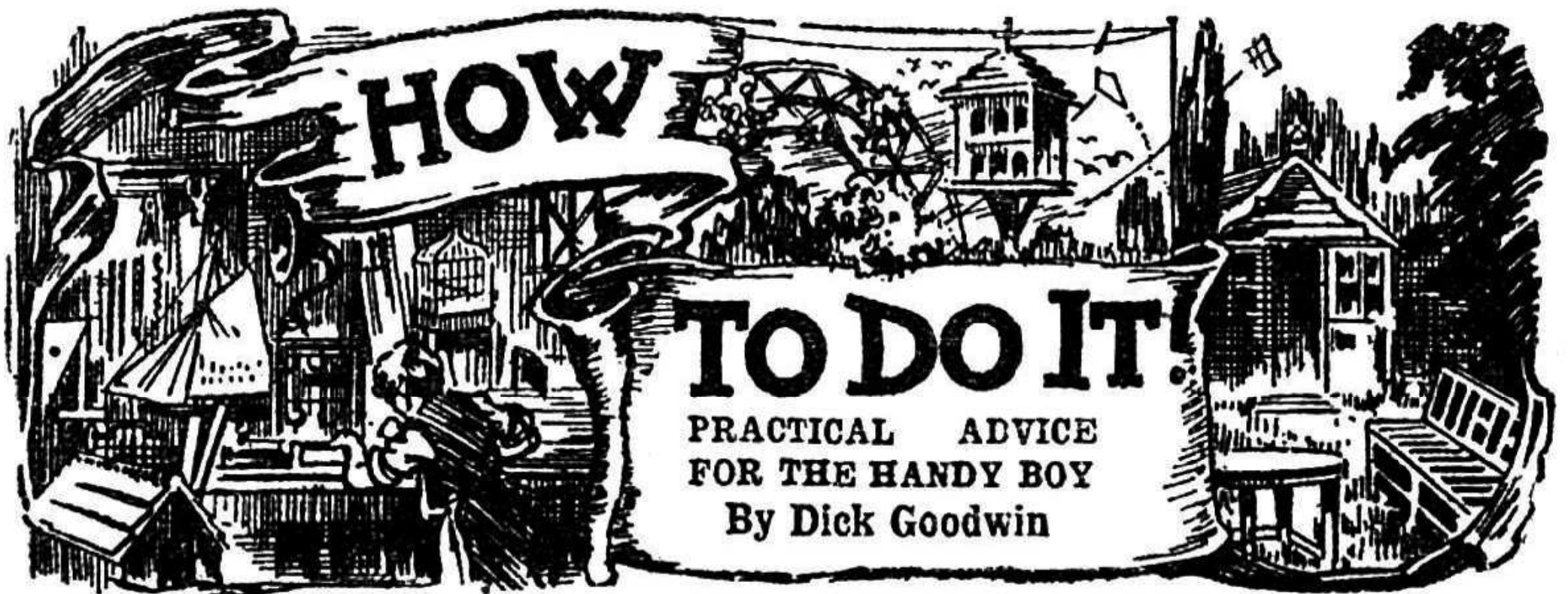
OFF TO LONDON NEXT WEEK!

After Glenthorne Manor comes our visit to Lord Dorrimore at his London residence. Here we shall have an opportunity of seeing a few pantomimes. And when we have spent a few days in London, we are due to go to another party. Jack Grey has invited us all down to Grey Towers. We are truly having a hectic time this Christmas.

With very best wishes,

Your sincere chum,

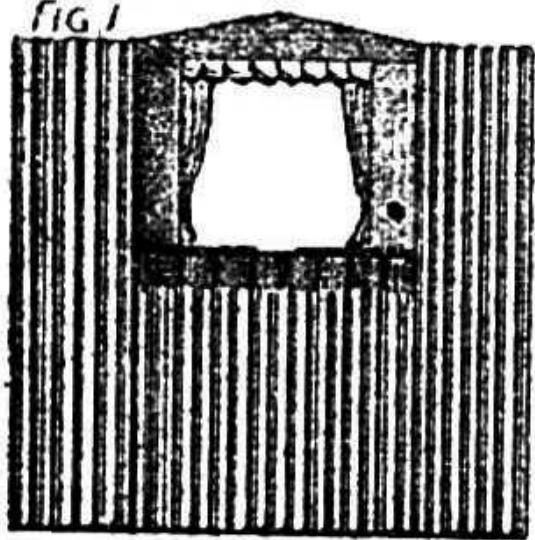
REGGIE PITT.



A LIVING MARIONETTE SHOW AND HOW TO MAKE THE FIT-UP

THE Living Marionette entertainment, as I work it, has proved a great success, judging by the number of times I am asked to give it during the Christmas holidays. It took some time to get into the correct method of working the figure in a natural manner, but this has now become almost automatic.

FIG. 1



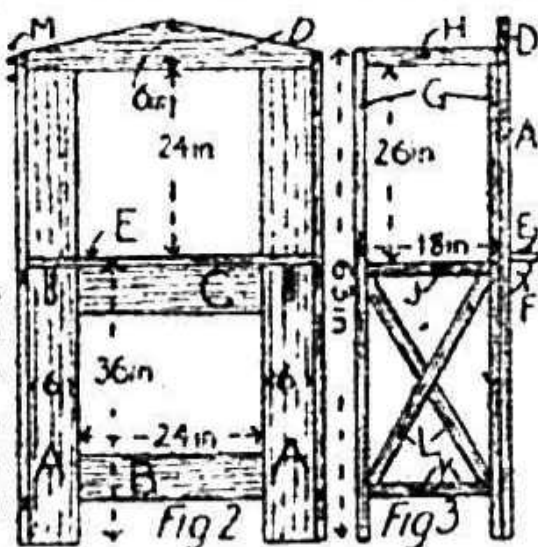
Some of you may not know the method of presenting the show. It is as follows: The performer stands behind a miniature stage makes up his face to represent a particular character, ties a black vest round his neck to which is attached a small jointed figure dressed to suit the part. Secured to the limbs are wires, which are held and worked by the hands, these covered with black gloves. A black curtain is hung at the back of the stage; this has holes for the head and the hands, and is very full to allow of movement from one side of the stage to the other. The figure can be made to dance and move about the stage in a natural manner while the performer talks and sings.

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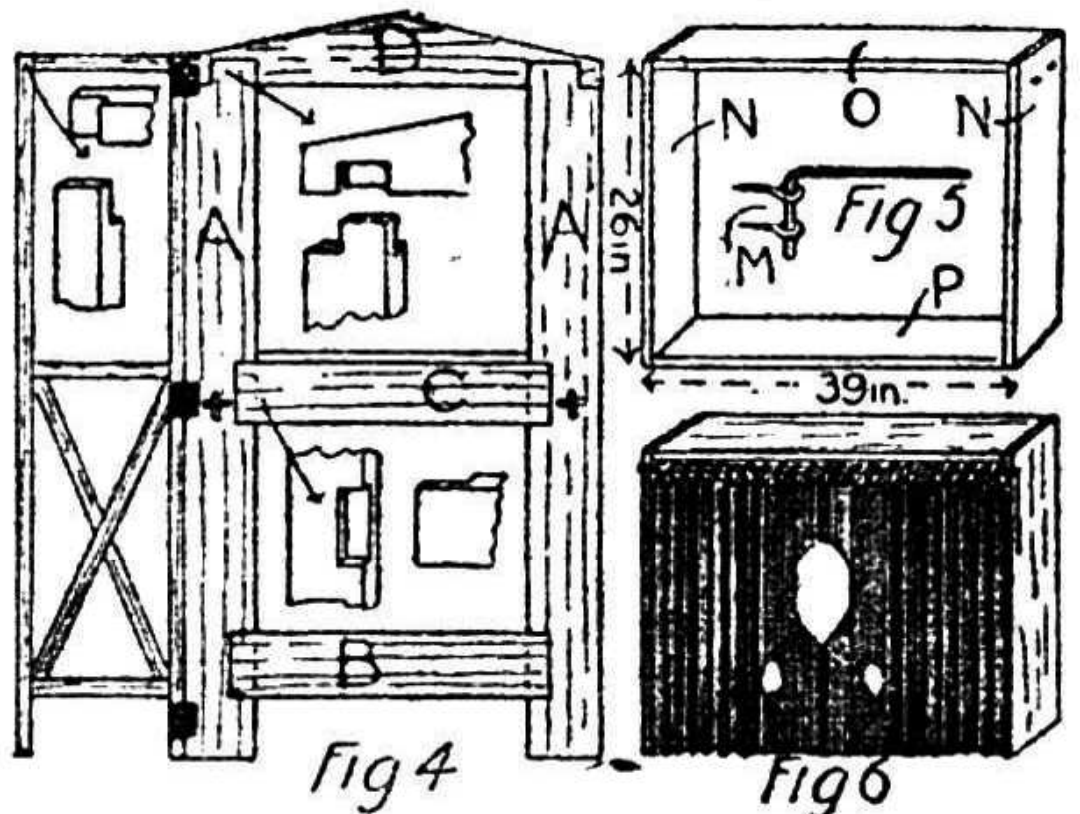
character, ties a black vest round his neck to which is attached a small jointed figure dressed to suit the part. Secured to the limbs are wires, which are held and worked by the hands, these covered with black gloves. A black curtain is hung at the back of the stage; this has holes for the head and the hands, and is very full to allow of movement from one side of the stage to the other. The figure can be made to dance and move about the stage in a natural manner while the performer talks and sings.

MAKING THE STAGE.

The finished stage, at Fig. 1, is draped with material, case-ment cloth is suitable. The construction, with measurements, is shown at Figs. 2 and



3, with a back view illustrating the joints at Fig. 4. The uprights and the cross pieces are of 6 in. by 1 in. wood, those at A being 5 ft. 3 ins., at B and C 2 ft. 4 ins., and at D 3 ft., all joined with the half lap joint shown. The front portion of the platform, E, is 3 ft. by 6 ins. by 1 in., has two 4 in. brackets underneath. The latter are fitted with large screw eyes which fit through slots in uprights A, and held in position



by wooden pegs for ease in packing up. The side frames are of 1½ in. square wood, joined with the lapped halving joint shown at Fig. 4.

The uprights, G, are 5 ft. 3 ins., the cross pieces, H, J and K, are 18 ins., and diagonal struts, L, are halved in the centre and fitted in the lower space. The distance between H and J is 26 ins. The two side frames are hinged with back-flap hinges, and they have two screw

eyes at the top each side to take a 15 in. long bracket made from $\frac{3}{8}$ in. round iron rod, as shown at M, Fig. 5.

FITTING THE DRAPERY.

Long curtains are hung on the iron brackets, and similar material is draped under the projecting platform, which is edged with a deep fringe. The exposed wood is painted or covered with decorative paper, and suitable hangings are fitted at the back of the opening to form the proscenium. The actual stage is

shown at Fig. 5, and consists of a framework of 6 ins. by 1 in. wood, two sides, N, 26 ins., and a top and bottom, O and P, nailed together. This portion fits on the side cross pieces J, and is kept in position with hooks and eyes. The back curtain should be made of velvet, but any dull material will do, providing it is quite black. The length of the curtain should be about 6 ft., and allowed to hang as full as possible; large curtain rings and a brass rod should be provided as at Fig. 6. The holes should be bound with black tape and fitted with elastic.

HOW TO MAKE THE PUPPET

THE working figure shown at Fig. 7 should be from 6 ins. to 9 ins. high, and can be provided from an ordinary doll, minus the head, or the body may be made from wood or material stuffed with sawdust. The limbs are attached to the body with strong tape with glue and thread, as at Fig. 8, and the wires fixed to the forearm and the calf of the legs; they must be painted black. A ready-made doll, if used, must have loose limbs, and generally it is advisable to separate them and attach them with tapes, as shown. As the body and limbs are clothed, the shape does not matter very much so long

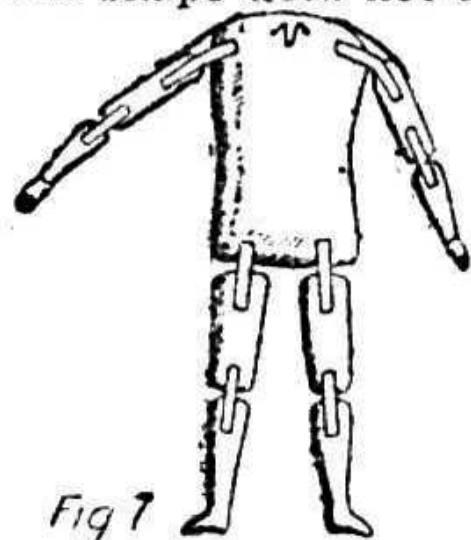


Fig 7

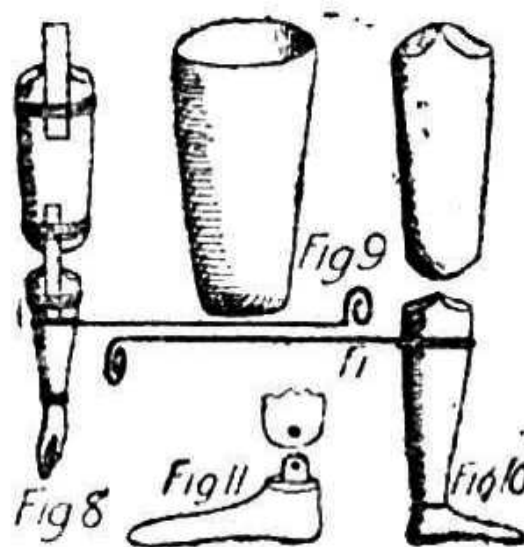
as the parts are in proportion; it is a simple matter to make the parts with calico and form them into bags in the first place, as at Fig. 9, fill with sawdust and sew securely. The lower portion of the leg, as at Fig. 10, should be fairly solid, and is better made of wood; at least the feet should be wood,

shaped to represent boots. A good plan is to make a separate foot and hinge it to the leg with a thin piece of brass, as at Fig. 11.

Some performers prefer to have the top of the forearm and the top of the calf hollow, so that the fingers can be placed inside; others who prefer the wire like it to screw in the leg and arm for ease in dressing. As it is generally more convenient to dress the puppet by sewing the parts of the dress to the figure, it is better to have fixed wires. A wire hook is fixed to the back of the figure, and this fits in a wire loop attached to the front of a large black vest, as at Fig. 12. This method of attaching allows the top of the body to fit close up under the chin of the performer.

FITTING THE CURTAINS.

It is necessary to have at least one drop curtain, and this can be painted similarly to those used in theatres, or can have the name of the performer on it instead. The roller for the curtain is fitted to the top of the back stage, as at Fig. 13, the bottom edge should be weighted



with a round lath, and the cord secured to the left-hand side. A length of broom handle forms a good curtain rod, but flanges of $\frac{1}{4}$ in. wood should be fitted on the cord end, as at Fig. 14. The position of the back portion of the stage with the drop curtain in position is shown at Fig. 15. To complete the fit up the front should be draped and the hangings for the side wings fitted. An addition to the fitments should be a safety curtain, placed just behind the front curtain. This should be of some light material, and as it is let down, which should be as slowly as possible, the words CURTAIN, then SAFETY, and finally EGG PROOF should

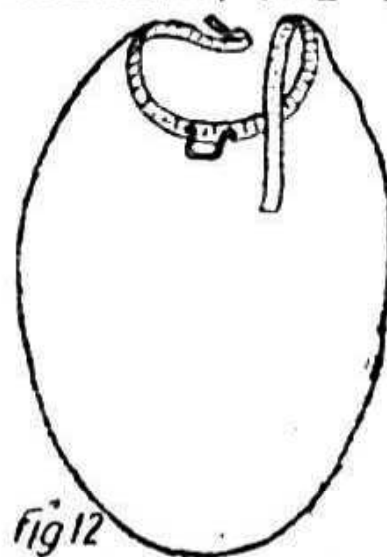


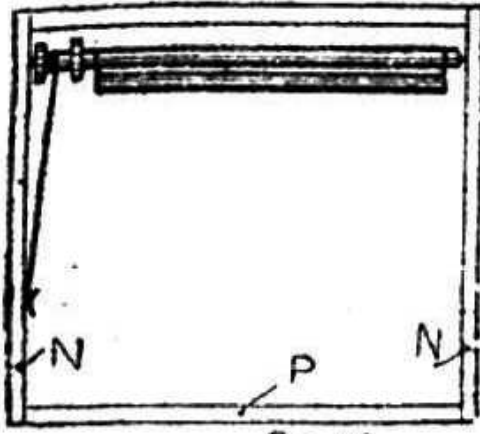
Fig 12

appear. This causes a lot of amusement. The whole of the woodwork inside the stage should be painted black, and to prevent light coming from the back, and also to shield the performer, the back and wings should be hung with a curtain.

Added realism is effected by fitting footlights. These can be made by attaching small lamps to a lath and backing them with shields of tin coated with black at the back. Another method is to fit brackets each side for ordinary lamps. When I cannot use electric lamps I fit up two acetylene cycle lamps so as to shine on the stage.

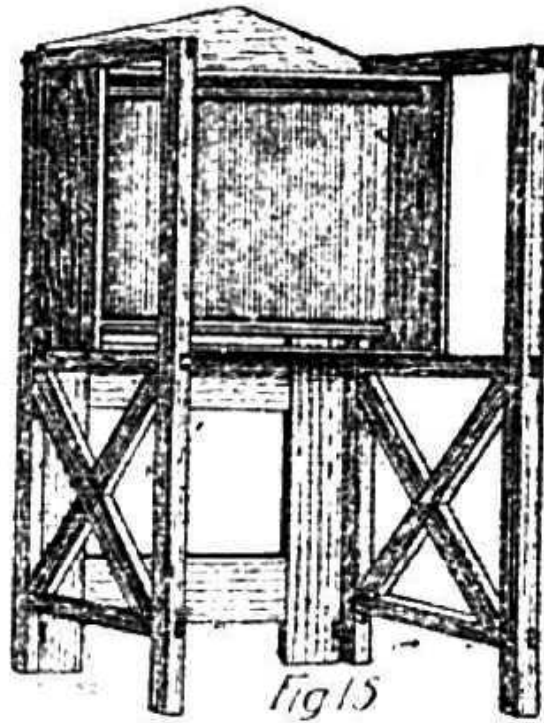
THE PERFORMANCE.

The front of the stage should be some distance from the first row of the audience—at least 8 ft.—the curtain should be down. An accompanist should open with a solo piece, and the performer should have his face made up, his head through the hole, and the figure hung on the hook under his chin. The curtain is now pulled up with the left



hand and the marionette makes his bow to the audience. The performer now takes hold of either leg or arm wires, according to what the programme is, and is ready for work. Unless the act has been well practised beforehand the beginner will be tempted to look down at the feet of the figure; this must be avoided.

A good method of getting used to the movements of the figure is to practise in front of a mirror. On no account should the performer



appear conscious of the figure he is working, and he must try and obtain the natural movements that the character represents in as easy a manner as possible. Monologues, songs with choruses, jokes of all kinds, and clog dances provide a good programme. A few sticks of grease paint, some crepe hair and spirit gum will suffice for make-up.

HINTS ON MAKE-UP

With Special Reference to Trackett Grim.

(See next page.)

THE recitation overleaf is only a specimen of what can be done. Of course, the puppet can be made to represent any figure you like. It can recite, or make a political speech or even sing and dance. The make-up for Trackett Grim is quite simple.

You will need a large, shabby, soft hat, preferably of black material. The legs and body will also be attired in some shabby grey or black cloth.

The face is long, pale, and thin, with a big nose. Most performers will need to provide themselves with a false nose which can be got quite cheaply. It fastens on by means of a thread of invisible cotton or elastic, which passes round the back of the head.

The eyebrows and hair should be grey, thick, and bushy. Grey crêpe, which can be obtained very cheaply, will do for this. Or burnt cork will make excellent eyebrows.

With the cork dark lines should also be

drawn from the corners of the mouth up to the base of the nose. Hollows in the cheeks can also be suggested in this manner.

A pair of horn-rimmed spectacles of plain glass will add to the disguise.

There are many other simple tricks which are very useful to know when amateurs are performing. For instance, it is often effective for a character to appear toothless.

This effect can be quite simply achieved by covering the teeth with black sticking-plaster. If little strips are placed at intervals it looks as if there are gaps between the teeth.

Other effects can be obtained with pink plaster. Short strips of this stuck on the flesh at the corners of the eyes or mouth alter the expression of the face and shape of features to an extraordinary degree.

The eyebrows, too, by the application of burnt cork or grease-paint, can be altered to any shape.

MARIONETTES IN HISTORY

The use of dolls or puppets as a form of dramatic art is as old as civilisation, and has been found to exist in all parts of the world. The best known example of the marionette show is that of the familiar Punch and Judy, famous not only in England but throughout Europe. In Italy, Punch is known as Pulcinella, and to this country do we owe the creation of the best

known figure of the puppet stage. Punch's extraordinary nose is undoubtedly of Roman origin, and as Italy is regarded as the home of marionette shows, there is every evidence to show that Mr. Punch came to this country from Italy.

ORIGIN OF THE MARIONETTE.

One would hardly associate the marionette show with the Church of the Middle Ages. Yet if we trace the origin from which this puppet entertainment derived its name, we find that the word "marionette" comes from "mariette," or Little Mary, a name which the Venetians gave to the wooden dolls used in religious processions.

THE LOST MAN FROM THE LAND BEYOND THE SNOW

Recitation for our Living Marionette Show

:: Character Study of Trackett Grim

'Twas an evening in the winter, and the lamps were burning low,

I was sitting in my study after tea.
My young assistant, Splinter, was stretched out by the stove,
When the sound of someone calling came to me.

At once I understood it. There was someone in the street.

He was shouting at my window from below.

I opened it and listened, and I heard the stranger shout:

"I'm the Lost Man from the Land Beyond the Snow!"

That was all the fellow uttered. Then he vanished in the night.

And I fell down with a shout upon my knees.

My heart was palpitating and my hair it stood on end,

The marrow in my bones began to freeze.

It was awful, ghastly, dreadful, the voice from out the night.

Brave as I am I shuddered then, I know.

When above the howling blizzard I heard the wailing yell

Of the Lost Man from the Land Beyond the Snow!

I pulled myself together. For my duty now was plain.

"Splinter, dear lad," I cried, "please pack my bag!

It's clear our help is needed. We must find that poor lost man.

Time is passing. We cannot afford to lag."

I slipped on my goloshes. My umbrella I unrolled;

I put my horn-rimmed glasses on my nose.

Thus disguised I was now ready to get upon the trail

Of the Lost Man from the Land Beyond the Snows!

The night was black as darkness as I set upon my quest,

With my young assistant, Splinter, by my side.

The rain came down in torrents, the snow was falling hard,

And the wind among the tree-tops howled and cried.

Death lurked at every corner. We cared not and went on.

On every hand the screams of ghosts arose!

But bravely on we stumbled, following up the trail,

Of the Lost Man from the Land Beyond the Snows!

Never shall I forget it! Just imagine if you can

The wildness of the storm about our ears.

No wonder that we trembled and our hearts went pit-a-pat.

And our minds were full of half a million fears!

But on we went up mountains, over rivers and down hills,

To a valley where the Deadly Nightshade grows.

And there across a meadow we came across the tracks

Of the Lost Man from the Land Beyond the Snows!

My arm was clutched by Splinter! He dropped the thermos-flask

He had carried with a thud upon the ground!

I tripped over my goloshes and fell down upon my nose,

There I lay upon the frosty, frozen ground!

It was awful! As I stumbled in trying to rise again

A grisly shape came tearing from the wood.

Its legs were four in number, and its ears were made of fur,

It raced right out upon us. Then it stood

And barked with awful menace! It was only a small dog!

But I trembled from my head down to my toes.

For I thought it was a lion sent to keep us off the trail

Of the Lost Man from the Land Beyond the Snows!

After that we crossed the meadow that the footprints led across,

We traced them to a spot beneath a wall.

Then I raised a shout of triumph, for I saw a man lying there,

And I knew our search had ended after all!

I produced my pocket flash-lamp and flashed it on his face,

As he lay upon the ground there in a doze.

(Continued on page iii of cover.)



A Christmas Adventure at Grey Towers.
By JACK GREY.

PART II.

"DAD!" I muttered huskily.
I dropped on my knees in the snow, horrified at seeing the still, silent form of my father in that dreadful attitude. And again I remembered that the appearance of the Grey Cavalier meant a death in the family.

"Dad!" I repeated. "Oh, he's dead—he's dead——"

I broke off, and my heart seemed to stop beating. For my father had stirred slightly, and a few seconds later he opened his eyes and looked at me with recognition.

"Why, Jack, my boy," he breathed, "what—what has happened? Why am I lying here? I—I seem to remember falling down——"

His voice trailed away, and at that moment two of the Grey Towers grooms came in sight round the bend. They must have guessed that something was amiss, for they broke into a run, and came up breathless.

I was glad of their arrival, for they lifted my father out of the snow and carried him to the Towers. Until the doctor had come, and made his examination, I was filled with terrible doubts.

And then I found that I needn't have worried at all. The pater had merely suffered from a slight heart attack, and was in no danger at all. The doctor ordered him to give up all thought of Christmas festivities, and to keep to his bed.

But the pater scoffed at such instructions, and the same evening he was downstairs to dinner. And he wanted to know why I had been so horrified in the morning. He

had seen more than mere concern in my eyes.

So, of course, I had to tell him about the Phantom Cavalier—how I had seen the ghost the previous night, and all about it. I reminded him that the spectre was a sign of death.

He didn't exactly ridicule the story, but it was clear that he thought I had imagined the whole thing. And it made me a bit wild. I was as keen as mustard to get some kind of proof—so that I could convince him.

But where could I get the proofs? Ghosts don't leave footprints or finger-marks, and I couldn't see any sense in watching for the Phantom again. Family ghosts don't appear twice in succession. Sometimes there's an interval of ten or twenty years between the visitations.

All the same, when bed-time arrived, I found it almost impossible to close my eyes. I just lay there in the darkness, staring across the bed-room, expecting to see the Phantom every minute. It was the same as on the previous night, only twenty times as bad.

But this time I didn't think about listening in on the wireless. I had an awful premonition of impending disaster. And at last, thoroughly scared, I decided to hurry to the pater's bed-room, to see if he was all right.

Perhaps I had delayed too long—perhaps I ought to have gone sooner. The thought made me break out into a cold perspiration. I didn't wait to get dressed—I just slipped on my dressing-gown and ran out.

Something seemed to tell me that I should



The catch gave way, the window flew open, and I toppled clean out, backwards.

see the Phantom Cavalier again in the corridor. But there was nothing unusual. The whole house was quiet and undisturbed.

I crept into the pater's room, found him calmly reading a magazine in front of a blazing fire, and enjoying a final cigar! And this on the top of his doctor's orders not to smoke! I felt an absolute ass, and escaped in no time—after telling my father that I just wanted to make certain he was all right. The very laugh he gave sent wriggles down my back.

I went back to my own bed-room thoroughly cooled. And I had just turned the last corner when I came face to face with the ghost! The meeting was so sudden and so unexpected that I literally jumped.

There he was—the Grey Cavalier!

The moonlight shone upon him in a ghastly fashion, and he advanced towards me with one hand outstretched. I backed away blindly, a kind of panic taking pos-

session of me. For I had a swift fear that I was the member of the family who had been marked down to die!

My back crashed against something hard. Without knowing it, I had flung myself backwards against a casement window. The catch gave way, the window flew open, and I toppled clean out, backwards.

It was a horrible sensation. I could feel myself falling—dropping like a stone to the ground. And during those few fleeting seconds all terror left me, and a flash of clear understanding came.

I was to die—and this accident was to be the cause of my death! So the Phantom Cavalier had appeared to some purpose, after all. Then I hit something with a slithering, sugging thud.

Great masses of iciness buried me and hemmed me in. It took me about half a minute to find out the truth. I had fallen headlong into a deep snowdrift—a piled-up mass of snow which had heaped itself against the side of the house. And, remarkably enough, I wasn't hurt.

As soon as I realised this, I fought my way out, and stood there, breathless. The night wind was cutting through me like knives. And it seemed that I should never be rid of that awful apparition.

For there stood the Grey Cavalier again—right on the terrace, facing me in the moonlight. I don't know what made me do it, but I rushed straight at him, fiercely determined to send him away out of my sight.

I crashed into something solid, and felt two arms gripping me.

"Steady, Master Jack—steady!" said a familiar voice. "I'm glad to see you active—I thought you'd killed yourself, sir! And it was my fault, too—I scared ye."

I stared at him dazedly.

"Peters!" I muttered huskily.

"Yes, Master Jack," said the apparition. "I didn't mean to frighten ye like that—I'll swear I didn't!"

Peters! The head footman! I stared at him in the same dazed way as before. Then, in a couple of sentences, he explained the truth. They were getting up some amateur theatricals in the servants' hall for Christmas, and Peters was cast as the family ghost! He'd simply been doing some late rehearsals with the rest of the company!

A bit tame, eh? Well, I can tell you it wasn't tame to me at the time. And it only proves how simple and easy it is to imagine all sorts of dreadful things without any real foundation.

Take my advice—if you see a ghost this Christmas, make certain he's a real ghost before getting scared!

IN QUEST OF GOLD!



A Marvellous New Serial of Breathless Adventure in the Klondyke and Alaska.

By the Celebrated Author
Edward Oswald Handforth

MEMORIES REFRESHED HERE.

Our heroes, Bob Brave and Claude Courage, have been snatched from the gold-diggings by a tribe of Indians on the war-path. Our heroes are now prisoners in a teepee, and it is Christmas Eve. The Indians are executing a war-dance round the camp fire, and things look pretty rotten for our heroes.

CHAPTER VIII.

LEAPING ELEPHANT, THE CHIEF.

THE door of the teepee was suddenly flung open, and a bent, wizened Indian marched in, attired in all his war-feathers. He glared at Bob Brave and Claude Courage with a terrific glare.

"Ugh! Heap fine palefaces!" he grunted. "Me big chief—me Leaping Elephant!"

"You look more like a dried monkey!" said Bob Brave boldly.

"Paleface boy die!" snarled Leaping Elephant. "No cheek me, or me scalp you. Savvy? Heap good feast now commence one time! My braves take you. Later we come for other paleface. Ugh!"

Bob Brave was seized by a dozen Indian braves, and yanked out of the teepee. Claude Courage took no notice of Leaping Elephant's cackling laugh, and cried aloud in his horror.

"Bob!" he howled. "Have no fear—I'll rescue you! Don't let these fatheaded Indians put the wind up you! I'll buzz off to the fort and bring the North-West Mounted Police!"

These words, uttered so ringingly, gave courage to the unfortunate Bob, and he felt reassured. Would his chum be able to bring help in time?

CHAPTER IX.

CHRISTMAS DAY AT FORT ADVENTURE.

CLAUDE COURAGE looked out of the window, and his heart hammered against his ribs so heavily that the thumps filled the whole teepee. And there was every reason for him to be alarmed. For Bob Brave, his bosom chum, was outside near the camp-fire. He was tied to a stake, and thousands of Indians were dancing a war-dance all round him.

And it was Christmas Day! Already the hour of midnight had struck, and by dawn Bob would be scalped and then shoved in the cauldron. The Indians were going to have Bob for their Christmas breakfast!

"What shall I do? What shall I do?" panted Claude, clinging to the bars of his prison. "In two hours there'll be nothing left of him except a giddy wishbone! Ah! What's this?"

One of the steel bars had come loose in his hand, and Claude uttered a yell of triumph. The way of escape was clear! He squeezed through the other bars and dropped to the ground. And the Indians were so busy with their intended victim that they didn't notice the flitting figure which whizzed out on to the prairie.

Claude had to fight every inch of his way. He drove straight through the Indians, knocking them right and left, and leaving the ground literally strewn with biffed braves. And at last he won clear of the Indian encampment, without a single red-skin being the wiser.

And then, racing like the wind, Claude set his face towards Fort Adventure, twenty miles away.

He was going for help! Across the boundless prairie he tore. Would he be able to get back in time to save his helpless chum?

[Wait until next week and see!—AUTHOR.]

CHRISTMAS CONVERSATIONS

Imagined by
CHARLIE TALMADGE

----- * -----

I.

IN THE LOUNGE-HALL.

NICK TROTWOOD: Hallo, Fatty! You're looking a bit full-blown! How are you enjoying the party?

FATTY LITTLE: Oh, first-rate. Everything's simply gorgeous. The turkey was too lovely for words—the plum-pudding was so topping that I had three helpings—

NICK TROTWOOD: I'm not talking about food! I mean the party.

FATTY LITTLE (staring): Great pancakes! The party! What does it matter about the party, so long as the grub's all right? In fact, the grub is the party! Without heaps and piles of good things to eat, a party ain't a party at all.

NICK TROTWOOD: Tastes differ, of course—personally, I'm more interested in the guests. Hallo, Corny! Where did you wander from? Looking for me?

CORNY TROTWOOD: My dear Nicodemus, it cannot be time for tea, surely?

NICK TROTWOOD: You deaf ass, I didn't say tea! But we won't argue—life's too short! Ask Fatty how he likes the grub.

CORNY TROTWOOD: Fatty has just come from the pub? Dear me, how disgusting! I am surprised, Little, that—

FATTY rolls off with a snort, and the TWINS argue.

II.

IN THE BALL-ROOM.

WILLY HANDFORTH: More dancing! Did you ever see such rot in your giddy life? Don't they look potty?

CHUBBY HEATH: Potty ain't the word! What's this—a fox trot?

WILLY HANDFORTH: Yes! Looks more like a shuffle! If some of these fat-heads could only see themselves dancing, they'd chuck it for the rest of their lives! This party's getting dead!

JUICY LEMON: I'm fed up! No games—no Blind Man's Buff, or Hunt the Slipper, or Musical Chairs, or anything! What's a party for, anyhow? This dancing makes me tired!

WILLY HANDFORTH: They said something about games later on. Like their nerve! Look here, what's the matter with a rag? Supposing we sneak upstairs and shove some holly in Archie's bed?

CHUBBY HEATH (brightening up): Jolly good idea! Better than watching this menagerie, anyhow!

WILLY HANDFORTH: Come on, then—we'll shove a bowl of water just beside

my major's bed, too. I shall be there when he steps into it! I tell you, my sons, there are compensations even for dancing! We shall have the upper quarters entirely to ourselves!

They go off, gleeful and chuckling.

III.

IN THE SERVANTS' HALL.

BUTLER: It fair beats me, it does! What's come over the master, havin' the 'ouse overrun by these schoolboys? More like a pack o' wolves! Never saw such a commotion!

HOUSEKEEPER: It ain't for us to criticise the master, Mr. Ferris! Although I do say as these young people takes my breath away. There's no end to 'em, in a way o' speakin'. We don't know whether we're on our head or our 'eels. Enough's as good as a feast, as the sayin' is.

BUTLER: Well, there's more than enough 'ere—take my word for it! Only 'arf an 'our ago I found two o' the young varmint's putting holly leaves on the bed-room floors. Schoolboys, eh? More like monkeys from the Zoo!

HOUSEKEEPER: Oh, well, the holidays don't last for ever, Mr. Ferris—an' I don't see what good we can do, anyhow. Would you like a little o' this port? It's the master's special!

BUTLER: A lot you know about the master's special! I've just 'ad a glass o' port that no money can buy nowadays— Still, just to please you— That'll do nicely, thanks. (Raises glass). Well, 'ere's to the 'our when this pack o' young demons clears hout!

IV.

IN THE DEPTHS OF THE CHESTERFIELD.

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE: What-ho! I mean, who goes there? Dash it all, kindly cease the rough stuff with the good old shoulder-blade!

ALF BRENT: Lazybones! Wake up, Archie! You're missing all the dancing and the fireworks, and everything! I've been looking for you for hours—and here you are asleep in the middle of this giddy Chesterfield.

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE: Absolutely! Laddie, I'm having a priceless time! Be good enough to retire into the good old undergrowth, or something juicy like that. The old tissues are howling for help!

ARCHIE dozes off, and ALF gives it up as a bad job.

My Christmas Waits

By Willy Handforth

(In an interview).

YOU want to know about the waits? Jealous, I suppose? Well, it was my idea in the first place. I got fed up with things. These parties are all very well, but there's always a couple of deadly hours between tea and dinner! Everybody's taking a nap, or dressing, or some silly piffle like that.

So I got hold of Chubby Heath and Juicy Lemon and Owen minor and Dicky Jones, and off we went. They didn't think much of the wheeze at first, but I soon put that right. Juicy's ear is nearly well again now, and you wouldn't know that Chubby had had a black eye. Anyhow, off we went.

Couldn't do anything at the Manor, of course—we're known too well. So we went all round the best streets of Bannington, and the way we yelled carols nearly brought the fire brigade out. In fact, in one street a policeman came up and asked who was injured! He thought we were howling for help. We really couldn't blame the chap, because Dicky Jones did yelp a bit. The fathead started singing "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," and all the rest of us were in the middle of "Good King Wenceslas." Naturally, I was obliged to biff the young fathead.

What's that? Did we get anything beyond old boots? I should say we did! At one house an old josser came out and distributed brand-new tanners! He thought we were slum kids! As soon as he found out that we'd come from the Manor, he got a bit fussy, and said he'd been tricked. In fact, he got quite nasty. Not that we cared. We half-filled his giddy hall with snowballs—and the old chump was underneath the lot!

On the whole, though, we did pretty well. We covered miles of ground, and sang till we were hoarse. But it gave us a fine appetite for dinner, and we got twenty-eight bob. Eight bob for Chubby and the rest, and a quid for me.

What's that? An unfair division? Rats! Wasn't it my idea to go out in the first place? Besides, those greedy young asses only wanted the money to squander on tuck! Just as if they didn't get enough at the party! I decided that two bob each was quite liberal.

My quid? Did I want it for tuck? Not likely! I've got that stowed away in a special pocket—so that I can buy a ripping little monkey at the pet shop in Bannington. That was the whole idea of the waits!

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And Splinter was beside me, and he shouted out in glee:

"It's the Lost Man from the Land Beyond the Snows!"

We woke him up and told him we had found him now at last,
But he only nodded, then began to sing.

So we picked him up between us and slowly took him home,
And half-way there he yelled like anything.

A man just then approached us. "Great Scott!" we heard him say.

"You've caught old Charley, have you? Give him here!"

Don't be frightened—he's quite harmless. I'll take him back at once

To his cell in the asylum. It's quite near."

"A lunatic!" I muttered. "Ah, now I see it all!"

This loony is a madman, I suppose."

With a nod the warder vanished, and walking by his side

Went the Lost Man from the Land Beyond the Snows!

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